FIRST YEAR HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES OF ENGAGING WITH WRITTEN FEEDBACK IN A POST-1992 UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

First year Humanities and Social Science students' experiences of engaging with written feedback in a post- 1992 university

This thesis examines students' experiences of engaging with written formative feedback in a post-1992 university. A body of literature on 'engagement with feedback' in higher education presents the student as somehow lacking the motivation to engage with feedback. The principles of a feminist methodology were adopted in an attempt to present the underrepresented views of students on the issue of their engagement with feedback. Participants were from two first year undergraduate modules which provided formative feedback on assignments. Qualitative research methods were used: 24 semi-structured interviews, 50 reflective writing documents and 83 questionnaires were collated for open-ended responses and descriptive patterns. Following an analysis of this data, an innovative model was developed.

The 'Student perspective on engaging with feedback model' was based on the three phases students moved through when engaging with feedback, which was influenced by the type and style of feedback they required at different stages of their transition. This transition involved a period of liminality (a state of betwixt and between) as individuals waited to go through a rite of passage, which often led to students finding themselves in 'stuck places' and experiencing feelings of 'being wrong'. The model demonstrates how firstly, students used the feedback as a 'sign' to confirm their learner identities. Secondly, students used the feedback to improve. They valued a personalised dialogue to enable them to do this successfully. Thirdly, they focused on future-orientated feedback, relating to employability and grades. These findings provide the basis for recommendations to HE tutors suggesting that changes to assessment practices and feedback comments may be beneficial for first year undergraduates as they navigate their transition to learning in higher education.

CONTENTS

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This introductory chapter sets the scene for the thesis and is divided into two sections. The first section provides the background information to the study. The second section discusses the aims of the research and the overall structure of the thesis.

Background information

How the thesis fits into the research literature

The research literature on assessment highlights the benefits of formative feedback for improving learning and some of the issues that prevent students from engaging effectively with feedback. A thorough examination of the literature confirmed that the student perspective on their reasons for engaging (or not) with feedback and what engaging meant to students was a relatively under researched area; with some notable exceptions, such as the work of Higgins *et al.*, (2002) and Poulos & Mahony, (2007) which had focused on the student perspective on their attitudes towards feedback. Thus, the empirical study that is reported in this doctoral thesis is an attempt to explore students' experiences of engaging with formative feedback. The students who participated in the research were a self-selecting sample from two first year undergraduate modules and the researcher took the stance of a non-participant observer who had been given access to these modules by 'gatekeepers' (module leaders). Both modules were based within the disciplines of Humanities and Social Sciences with a focus on academic writing and a commitment to providing formative feedback. In the main study 24 students took part in semi-structured interviews, 83 participants completed the questionnaire and 50 students gave permission for analysis of their reflective writing. It became clear through the background study that the student 'voice' should be central to the thesis.

Therefore a methodology with a strong commitment to the voice of participants was required. In light of this, a feminist inspired approach to interviewing has been adopted to ensure an attempt to focus on the 'voice' of the participants. Feminists acknowledge that not all participants will wish to share their experiences through an interview. Consequently, a questionnaire was administered to students on both modules to complement the interview data and allowed participants to respond to closed and open- ended questions anonymously.

This gave an overview of descriptive statistics and an analysis of open-ended responses highlighting the significance of certain themes within the data analysis. The open-ended responses in particular provided a rich set of data focusing on the significance of opportunities for dialogue with tutors and the need for feedback which could be transferred to a student's next assignment. Students on the module Developing Academic Writing (DAW1300) were asked to write a reflection on engaging with feedback after watching a video of students at another university receiving feedback (by the module leader). Reflective writing gave participants an opportunity to articulate their experiences without the issues of hierarchy and power that can emerge in an interview. After gaining students consent to see copies of their reflective writing, I was then able to analyse it for themes and patterns. The analysis of the reflective writing strongly resonated with the themes emerging from the interviews. As well as a consideration of the impact of research methods for participants the use of different data sources allowed for triangulation of the data.

Why this research has been undertaken

The focus of this study arose from the anecdotal experiences of lecturers' which indicated students did not engage with formative feedback and this was also supported by the literature on engaging with feedback. A studentship for this piece of research was created and was funded through the Centre for Excellent in Teaching and Learning (CETL) which focused on aspects of the student experience in their first year at university, such as retention and assessment.

In the academic year 2008/2009 24,000 students were enrolled with the University of Newcity (pseudonym), with nearly two thirds of students from the local region. Almost all the students are from state schools and one in five comes from an area of low participation in higher education. A third of the places are filled by mature students (Times online, 2009). This research aimed to understand how students' experiences of formative feedback may contribute to and improve students' first year experiences of university.

Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2: Background study

In chapter 2 I discuss the background study outlining its context. The background study begins with an exploration of the research literature, considers the suitability of the original

research questions, methodology and research methods. The background study concluded that changes needed to be made to the research questions. The proposed research method of semi-structured interviews was still appropriate for the main study.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

Chapter 3 engages with the literature on student engagement with feedback and provides a definition of formative feedback. It considers the emphasis in the literature on the teacher/institutional perspective on student engagement with feedback. The concept of engagement is discussed and how this does not take into account the student perspective. The literature examines models that have been developed to explain the feedback process and student engagement with feedback. The literature review concludes that more research needs to be conducted to explore the student perspective on feedback and that the concept of engagement also needs to be understood from their perspective. Furthermore, it is suggested a new model needs to be developed to understand the student perspective on engaging with feedback.

Chapter 4: Methodology

In chapter 4 I discuss the methodology used. I explain how action research was no longer a suitable methodology for the main study and discuss the need for an alternative methodology which would focus on the student voice. The methodology used in the main study is discussed, explaining its underpinning interpretivist epistemology and more specifically how it applies feminist principles to the research.

Chapter 5: Research design

In chapter 5 I explain the research design. The research design is qualitative and interpretive. Semi-structured interviews were used with 24 participants in the main study. These were digitally recorded and I then transcribed these interviews, with interviews of up to one hour. I also collected 83 questionnaires to gain demographic data, descriptive statistics and qualitative open-ended question responses. The open-ended questions were to explore what the students perceived to be helpful or unhelpful feedback and any other issues regarding feedback that were important to them. The themes that emerged from the interviews (‘lecturer as a significant other’, ‘care’, ‘reinvention’ and ‘being wrong’) were also applied to 50 pieces of reflective writing on formative feedback and triangulated the research findings. A further five interviews were conducted to discuss the validity of the research findings. The analysis

of the data involved principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), such as identifying concepts and making memos. An additional layer of analysis was sought through principles of narrative inquiry, for example the use of metaphors and contrastive rhetoric. The analysis framework is outlined in appendix 4.

Chapter 6: Findings

Chapter 6 explores the affective dimensions of students' experiences of feedback. This chapter highlights the emotions associated with the students' troubling journeys (Cousin, 2006) into higher education and its subsequent impact on their experience of feedback at university. The chapter then goes on to consider the students' liminal experiences of waiting for feedback and how 'positive' feedback acted as a rite of passage into 'student-hood'. Students needed to submit work of the appropriate quality to receive positive feedback. In this sense going through the rite of passage to 'belong' at university was not automatic, but had to be earned. Following this, students' emotions in relation to 'being wrong' is explored and how this influenced engagement with feedback.

Chapter 7: Findings

In chapter 7 with consideration of the affective dimensions of feedback, this chapter focuses more closely on the findings from the study in relation to the research questions. The findings discuss the backgrounds of the research participants' and how this may impact on their experiences and perceptions of feedback. The findings then go on to discuss the students' concepts of engaging with feedback. The findings also explore the factors which students perceive promote or prevent engagement with feedback. Based on these findings a model of 'Students' experiences of engaging with feedback' was developed. This model charts the three phases of students' feedback needs as they move through their first year at university: confirmation of learner identity, improvement and future-orientated feedback.

Chapter 8: Discussion

In chapter 8 I discuss the final research question 3a. 'what are the implications of this for students and teachers, policy and practice across the university sector?' in relation to the findings. In particular the discussion identifies dialogue and peer feedback as potentially effective strategies for improving feedback practices and supporting students through the transition of feedback needs discussed in chapter 7.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

In chapter 9 I conclude that the research has added to the current literature through focusing on the student perspective, using a methodology not generally associated with feedback research, exploring the affective dimensions of feedback in depth and developing a model which focuses on the student experience of engaging with feedback. The development of this model has identified a new way in which to think about supporting student engagement with feedback based on their stages of transition in their first year at university.

Chapter 10: Postscript

In chapter 10 I reflect on my experience of receiving and engaging with feedback whilst also researching this topic.

References

Appendices

Chapter 2: Background study

This chapter discusses the background study being undertaken for the research project 'First year Humanities and Social Science students' experiences of engaging with written feedback in a post-1992 university'. This chapter provides a broad overview of the background study before considering each of my four aims more specifically. The first aim of my background study is to start to review the literature on student engagement with feedback. The second aim is to test my research methods. The third aim of my background study is to test the suitability of my methodology and the final aim is to test my research questions.

1. What are the student characteristics which impact positively or negatively on engagement with feedback?
2. What other circumstances influence student engagement with feedback?

Research questions can only initially guess at the most appropriate focus for a piece of research and on analysing the data the original research questions may need to be amended. Therefore the research questions used at the very beginning of this thesis reflect the tentative nature of my thoughts at the outset of the project. The background study addresses how these questions were subsequently shaped as a consequence of this early stage in the research. The chapter concludes with a summary of the implications of the background study for the main study research questions.

Overview of the background study

The background study is centred on a first year module Developing Academic Writing (DAW1300) (the name of this module is a pseudonym, as is the name of all participants, lecturers and the institution discussed in this thesis). The module teaches a range of skills related to academic writing, such as structure, argument and referencing. It is aimed at students from a range of disciplines mainly within the Humanities and Social Sciences. The module is assessed through a portfolio with a variety of tasks, such as writing bibliographies, essay drafts and a final discipline specific essay. Students have the opportunity to hand in tasks for written feedback. Some of the tasks are awarded pass/fail marks and others are graded alpha-numerically, such as A16 - F0, A16 being the highest possible mark and F0

being a fail grade. The written feedback is promptly given the week after initial submission and there is the opportunity to follow up written comments with verbal feedback in a one-to-one tutorial session. The module is offered in both semester one and semester two. This stage of the research focused on semester two in which the module is an elective (a module students choose to undertake). The number of students registered on the module was 63.

Literature review

The first year experience at university is a significant one and is linked to issues of retention (Tinto, 1993) and research has focused on factors ensuring progression and success for first year students. Teaching and learning, naturally plays a big part in the retention of students and developments have been made in this area (Wilcox *et al.*, 2005). Assessment is clearly linked to conceptualisations of teaching and learning, yet little research has been done specifically on the impact of written feedback on student engagement. Yorke (2003) has highlighted how the role of formative feedback in making a positive contribution to student retention in the first year is not currently being optimised. He discusses how formative assessment might be better able to contribute to student development and retention, which is generally acknowledged to be critical in the first year. However, research carried out on assessment in the first year experience context has focused on types of assessment, for example Harvey *et al.*, (2006) found that first years generally preferred coursework assessment and highlighted the importance of students' and lecturers' having shared understandings of assessment criteria. Consequently, the impact of written feedback on student engagement in the first year needs to be explored further.

Student engagement with tutor feedback is affected by a wide range of factors, such as student misconceptions about formative feedback (Chanock, 2000; Maclellan, 2001) and self -esteem (Dweck, 2000). However, these findings are about students in general within higher education and do not take into account the first year experience context. Young (2000) found that negative feedback had a detrimental effect on mature students taking Access courses who had low self –esteem, as this could lead to them leaving their course. Psychologists have moved beyond deep and surface learning explanations to understand student engagement in more detail. It has been found that students who have mastery - orientated skills and see themselves as having the potential to learn and develop, can cope with feedback much more

effectively than students who see their ability as a fixed trait (Dweck, 2000). These research findings (Young, 2000; Dweck, 2000) have implications for the type of feedback given to all students, but first year students are a particularly vulnerable group, having to cope with a multitude of new experiences simultaneously. Hanson (1998 in Young, 2000) also suggests that because the earliest assignments cause students the greatest concern, the feedback should be prompt with not too much significance attached to the task. Also the assessment should be formative in nature, giving students the opportunity to improve and develop. Although as Young argues there is no formula for giving written feedback, listening to the student voice in relation to their experiences of written feedback may help practitioners in developing their delivery of effective written feedback. I used two research methods to explore students' perceptions of feedback.

Testing my research methods

The two research methods I used were: analysis of feedback comments and interviews with students. The reason I chose to use these two methods was because I wanted to analyse the type of formative feedback the students were receiving and I also wanted to understand students' perspectives on their feedback. Written feedback is an integral part of the student experience at university and can shape students' learning and development. Despite high interest within assessment research in explaining students lack of engagement with feedback, few studies have discussed the impact of specific features of written feedback on student engagement.

Feedback comments

I had 50 pieces of written feedback and I looked at the comments both in the margins of the text and at the end of the assignments. The feedback was given on tasks which students were submitting as part of their portfolio for the module. My choice of feedback comments for analysis was based solely on students who had submitted work for feedback, who then gave me permission to take a copy of the feedback for analysis. This comprised of feedback on the assignment pro-forma as well as comments in the margins of the assignment (please see appendix 6 for examples of the feedback comments). The feedback comments were analysed to ascertain the extent to which feedback followed formative feedback principles. A range of coding frameworks have been developed for the purpose of analysing written feedback comments, Hyland and Hyland (2001), Goldstein and Conrad (1990), Straub (1999) and

Brown *et al.,* (2003). There are a range of themes that run through all of these analytical frameworks, such as praise (or lack of), questioning, content and surface features such as spelling and grammar. The coding I developed for the analysis of written feedback on the module at the centre of this study emerged from commonalities between feedback analysis frameworks, as well as my own codes which were pertinent to the specific feedback I was analysing, such as statements and examples. This analysis was used to triangulate the interview responses.

Interviews

Initially informal conversations were held with students individually and in pairs during the module break about the feedback they had or had not received on the module. My informal conversations with students helped to shape the interview questions. The themes that emerged from these open - ended questions allowed the interview questions to be developed. The majority of interviews were part of a pre-arranged meeting in the university. The significance of the pre-arranged interviews was that they allowed me to talk to students in much more depth as we had more time and also that these interviews could be digitally recorded. Ten interviews were carried out altogether. The majority of these students were students who I had initially spoken to informally during the module break. These semi - structured interviews ascertained students experience of written feedback within the first semester, if they had received written feedback within DAW1300, the usefulness of this written feedback and motives for handing in work (or not).The interview questions I asked the students were:

- What was your experience of feedback in semester 1?
- Have you received any feedback in this module?
- What did you think about the feedback you received?
- Can you use the feedback to improve your work independently?
- Do you intend to use the feedback?
- Why have you not handed work in for feedback?

I felt very pleased with the responses of students' in the interviews and felt that this would be an ideal method to continue to use in the main study. However I decided I would also like to gain a broad overview of the students' experiences and felt a questionnaire would enable me

to do this in the main study. From my data collection and analysis of the feedback comments and semi-structured interviews I considered the extent to which my research questions had been addressed.

Testing my research questions

What are the student characteristics which impact positively or negatively on engagement with feedback?

I was interested to learn if students 'characteristics' were influential in their level of engagement with feedback. Dweck (2000) contends that a love of learning and valuing hard work is the mould for successful learners. An example of this might be this type of learner may be more likely to respond to feedback in order to improve and develop. Conversely a student who believes their intelligence is a fixed trait may be less likely to see the potential of feedback in helping them to improve as they would be less likely to believe in their own potential for development.

My research findings suggested that the idea of particular student characteristics making them more likely or not to engage with feedback was over simplistic. This is because students may share similar characteristics, such as wanting to be successful, but their underlying motivations for engaging with feedback could be very different. The students who did submit drafts of assignments often did so because they were unsure, for example they lacked confidence in their ability and saw feedback as a way of checking if their work was okay. '*I hand it in [work for feedback] because I'm not very good'* (Danielle, interview). Alternatively, students wanted to get good grades and used feedback as a way of trying to improve their work. *'I hand in to improve – to get better grades'* (James, interview). The different reasons students' gave for engaging with feedback suggest that there was no set of characteristics specific to the students who engaged with the feedback. Students' also gave different reasons for not submitting their assignments for feedback.

The reasons students gave for not handing in work indicates that apparent disengagement is possibly caused by a number of factors, which are not always under the control of the students themselves. The feedback system in DAW1300 is optional and students felt the need to prioritise. This meant that when the students had a specific deadline for another module to

meet they opted to complete this work first. *'The reason is I'm part time doing three modules, but really concentrating on the other two – I am getting up to speed. I would have liked to get feedback but just the sheer volume – a lot of work that needs to be done'* (Stefan, interview). Therefore time – management and an additionally heavy workload in other modules was a reason for not handing in work for feedback. However, there was often a strong level of intention to hand in work for feedback, *'Because it's optional it does not encourage you to hand it in – I keep improving it'* (Catherine, interview) which suggests that the students were initially engaged, however without specific deadlines for submission some students lost their impetus to continue and found it difficult to let go of their work.

Overall, these findings suggest that students submit draft assignments for a variety of reasons and it is not possible to identify 'characteristics' which indicate engagement levels. Equally, the reasons students' do not submit a draft assignment is often linked to issues of studying a range of modules and the need to prioritise compulsory elements over optional choices. In light of these findings I feel that this research question focusing on 'characteristics' would be inappropriate for the main study.

What other circumstances influence student engagement with feedback?

I wanted to see if there were any other factors (not students' characteristics) which influenced engagement with feedback. Having read the research of Chanock (2000) and Maclellan (2001) I was interested to see to what extent issues around understanding feedback was a circumstance influencing engagement with feedback. The students in my background study who did submit work for feedback felt that they understood the feedback, but they found it difficult to translate this into making improvements to their work. *'Some examples of what they mean would be helpful. I don't know how to change it'* (Danielle, interview). This shows that they are not able to 'close the gap' between their current performance and their desired performance. This means that not engaging with feedback is not simply because they are not motivated to, but they actually have very real difficulties in making these changes without additional support: *'Yeah it's okay – it tells me what to improve, but sometimes I can't understand how to change the work'* (Andrew, interview). The research findings from the background study suggest then that understanding feedback is a problem for students and that it is likely to have an impact on the likelihood of them engaging with the feedback. Difficulty in understanding feedback was further supported by the overwhelming call for verbal feedback by students. This suggests that the written feedback they have received is not

providing them with everything that they need. There are advantages to verbal feedback, such as being able to ask for clarification and pick up non - verbal clues about their performance from the lecturer (Race, 2007).

Feedback comments

The types of feedback comments students were given may also have influenced their engagement with feedback, for example hedges provide a softening element to the written comments, such as *'I think'* or *'maybe you could consider…'* Comments without hedges have no softening elements in them, for example *'You write your paper as though the claims you make apply to all women. Be careful because they do not'*. The lack of hedges can make written feedback appear abrasive and suggest that the work is 'wrong'. The feedback analysed in the background study generally transferred ownership of 'errors' to the student, for example *'You tend to over use "within"'* and *'Make sure that all the details you include are relevant'*. The background study gave feedback throughout the text, this is likely to have increased the number of editing comments linked to surface features, such as grammar and punctuation, for example comments such as *'Not Capital letter'* and *'Be careful to check your use of inverted commas'* were common. Praise is an act which attributes credit to another for some characteristic, attribute, skill etc which is positively valued by the person giving feedback (Hyland and Hyland, 2001).The background study uses specific indicators of praise, such as *'Good'*, although these were not linked to specific items within the assignment. This perhaps made it difficult for students to know what they had done well and how to repeat this 'good' performance.

Another theme emerging from the background study feedback comments are questions and statements, for example *'According to whom?'* and *'could you give a couple of brief examples here?'* Statements, such as *'This is not especially clear to me'* and *'I wouldn't think any of them were of the peoples choosing!'* Students in the background study also often said that they found it difficult to use the comments, although they could understand the comments in themselves. When the comments are analysed, this makes sense in the fact, that yes they understand what, for example single and double inverted comments are, but at the same time it is perhaps not clear to them what the correct practice is in regard to the culture of academic writing. They may indeed be able to go and find out the correct procedure from for example a study skills book, but it is not a straightforward process and requires a degree of planning and organisation. Students' wanted examples included in their feedback

comments, such as what the Harvard referencing system looks like so that they can compare and apply the example given to their own referencing, *'An example of what they mean would be helpful'* (Danielle, interview).

The students' spoke of writing assignments for DAW1300 and other modules as a guessing game, giving the lecturer what they want, with different lecturers wanting different things. The students appeared to be unclear about what was expected of them by academic staff. The students' comments suggest a degree of confusion over what is expected of them. '*It's like playing a game – you have to write about the topic the lecturer is most interested in'* (Henry, interview) and '*They all want different things'* (Tina, interview).This suggests that students may not see their feedback as being relevant across a range of assignments or modules and this will not encourage engagement with feedback.

To summarise a range of circumstances: mis/understanding feedback, the availability of verbal feedback and the transferability of feedback to other assignments/modules may also influence engagement with feedback. I felt that this was an interesting area to focus on particularly from the student point of view and felt that this question could be explored in much more depth in the main study. Therefore, when considering the suitability of my research questions for the main study I decided to make several changes. As mentioned previously I no longer felt that a question about student characteristics was appropriate. It is clear that a range of factors influence student engagement with feedback and I wished to ask the question: What circumstances promote/prevent student engagement with feedback? Discussing engagement with feedback with students suggested that they perhaps have their own specific ideas about what it means to engage with feedback and therefore I wished to include the question 'What does engaging with feedback mean to students?' I also had reservations about the efficacy of analysing the feedback comments the students were provided with. Although this raised some interesting points in the background study, I felt it may raise questions outside my remit – as I wanted to understand the student experience of feedback and felt it may reduce student trust in the research and me if they perceived I was 'checking' the veracity of their views with an analysis of feedback comments. I decided it might be more appropriate to triangulate my data in other ways, such as the questionnaire discussed earlier. I now wanted to consider how the findings I had identified would influence my research methodology.

Testing my methodology

Action research is a positive methodology that can be implemented when seeking to improve practice and performance, which is particularly relevant within an education setting because of its potential to develop the learning environment. The use of action research in this project has several advantages, since not only will it highlight the current experience of student engagement with feedback from their perspective, but it will also be very productive in developing student engagement with feedback in a positive way. Having considered the variety of methodologies available, I feel that the work of Swann & Ecclestone (1999) is similar to the current research in its action research aims to work with practitioners to improve aspects of assessment, in this instance develop feedback practices to support student engagement. Please see the methodology chapter for a more in-depth discussion of the action research process my research undertook.

My use of an action research methodology seemed entirely consistent with the piece of research I was undertaking to develop student engagement with feedback through understanding their experience of feedback. It was clear from the students' interview comments that several changes could be made to the module, for example a change in focus of the written feedback to make it more understandable to students. Furthermore, although some students were motivated to submit assignments on a voluntary basis, many were not because of the time-pressures of compulsory submission in other modules. Changes to the assessment may have enabled students to hand in work, for example a proportion of marks being given to draft assignments and a consideration of the timetabling of other assignments in other modules. Finally, verbal feedback was very important to students for clarification of feedback comments and to enable them to engage in a dialogue about their work. I think again changes to the assessment would have allowed this to have been in-built into the module ensuring that all students were required to engage in this process.

A number of suggestions for action research could be proposed to develop student engagement with feedback, such as developing strategies for 'closing the gap' (Ramaprasad, 1983), with the explicit use of exemplars and criteria and also increasing peer and self assessment opportunities (Lui & Carless, 2006) and may indeed improve engagement with feedback in this particular module based on the assertions expressed by the students in the

background study. This background study also highlights how significant it is to listen to the voices of students' in the first year because their experiences can and should have a real impact on assessment policy and development.

Summary of background study chapter

To summarise then the background study chapter has discussed the implementation of early stage reconnaissance in the action research cycle. It has also reflected on the effectiveness of interviews as a valid approach to use in the main study. The background study suggests the continuation of an action research methodology being used in the main study is appropriate. In light of the findings from the background study the research questions have also been amended to reflect the amended focus underpinning which will be used for the main study:

- What is the student perspective on engaging with feedback?
- What does engaging with feedback mean to students?
- What are the factors that promote/prevent engagement with feedback?

The background study confirms the value of listening to the student voice with respect to their experience of feedback in their first year at university.

Chapter 3: Literature review

This chapter reviews the literature on student engagement with feedback, in order to present a critical understanding of the issues surrounding it. An increased awareness of the benefits of formative feedback on student learning has been developed through seminal meta-narratives, such as Black & Wiliam (1998). In fact, feedback has been identified as one of the most powerful influences on learning achievement (Yorke, 2003; Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Therefore, it is of great concern that many studies have concluded that students in higher education do not engage with feedback (Chanock, 2000; Maclellan, 2001; Weaver, 2006). However, students are often dissatisfied with feedback (National Student Survey, 2007; 2008; Williams & Kane, 2008; Orrell, 2006), yet, at the same time students report placing great value on the feedback that they receive on their assignments (Higgins *et al.,* 2002). My aim in this literature review is to evaluate these complex and seemingly contradictory ideas around student engagement with feedback.

Scope of the literature review

My literature review focuses expressly on student engagement with feedback in higher education. I considered the large amount of research into formative feedback and formative assessment carried out in the area of compulsory schooling and Further Education and also that in the international arena. However, I have only included seminal work such as that of Black and Wiliam (1998) in the United Kingdom (UK) and selected international research. This is because I share the view of other researchers, such as (Sadler, 1998; Rust *et al.*, 2005; Higgins *et al.*, 2001; Lea & Street., 1998; Handley, 2007), that context is significant in the processes of formative feedback. Therefore I argue that the differences between the teaching and learning context in higher education and in other educational sectors, justifies my decision to focus only on higher education in the UK.

Context

The contextual issues surrounding formative feedback are important because they circumscribe the literature review. Assessment has been identified as the single most influential factor in student learning (Snyder, 1971; Miller & Parlett, 1974; Gibbs &

Simpson, 2004). Furthermore, it is a widely held belief in higher education that formative feedback is a valuable tool in enabling students to develop and improve (Yorke, 2003). There is now a greater understanding of the benefits of formative feedback. It can focus on shared learning goals, whereby staff and students try to reach a common understanding of the criteria being fulfilled. Formative feedback can also involve students in the assessment process, through peer and self-assessment. The concept of assessment for learning, as advocated by Black & Wiliam (1998), suggests that formative feedback should provide students with information about their next steps and how to achieve them. Feedback should also be motivational and constructive. However, Williams & Kane (2008) contend that the potential benefits of feedback in the assessment process do not always translate into a positive learning experience for students.

Not only is feedback valuable in helping students learn, it has also been linked to the nurturing of their self belief (Yorke & Knight, 2004; Young, 2000). However, the amount of written feedback provided to students on their assignments is shrinking according to Hounsell (in Slowey & Watson, 2003) and this could have a detrimental impact on student confidence to progress in their learning. The smaller amounts of feedback being given to students are attributed to several structural factors within the university system: modularisation of courses, assessments at the end of each semester and increased class sizes. The modularisation of courses within the division of two semesters has meant that students need to be 'tested' for each module, often at the end of each semester. The impact on feedback is that the timing of assignments and feedback are at the end of each module. The feedback may then be given at the start of the next semester, often when the student has 'moved on'. At the same time larger classes have meant an increased marking load for staff. The result is that teachers have less time to write detailed feedback and there is less opportunity for dialogue around feedback within tutorial sessions.

The literature review is divided into six sections and is shaped by the three research questions which were developed from my background study. The first section provides definitions of feedback and the second section provides definitions of engagement with feedback. The second section also considers my research question 'What does engaging with feedback mean to students?' The third section indicates staff perspectives on engagement with feedback and is linked to my research question 'What are the factors that promote/prevent engagement with feedback?' The fourth section on student perspectives on engagement with feedback

discusses my last research question ‘What is the student perspective on feedback?’ The fifth section explains my amended research questions. Finally, the sixth section locates the focus of my own research in relation to the literature.

Defining feedback

In this section, definitions of feedback are reviewed. The definition of feedback given by Hattie & Timperley (2007, p. 81) describes feedback as:

‘… information provided by an agent (e.g., teacher, peer, book, parent, self, experience) regarding aspects of one’s performance or understanding…feedback thus is a consequence of performance.’

The Hattie & Timperley (2007) definition suggests that feedback can come from a wide range of sources and that it is a response to something, for example an assignment task. However, the Hattie & Timperley (2007) definition is a general one, which can refer to either summative feedback or formative feedback. Summative feedback is ‘a judgement which encapsulates all the evidence up to a given point’ (Taras, 2005, p. 468), for example this may take the form of a grade or percentage mark on an assignment. However, my focus in this piece of research is on formative feedback only and therefore the literature review will concentrate on formative feedback.

Definitions of formative feedback

There are two seminal definitions of formative feedback (Ramaprasad, 1983; Sadler, 1989) that are often cited in the feedback literature in higher education (Taras, 2005; Orsmond, 2005). Ramaprasad defines formative feedback as, ‘information about the gap between the actual level and the reference level of a system parameter which is used to alter the gap in some way’ (Ramaprasad, 1983, p. 4). Sadler’s (1989) definition is ‘formative feedback is targeted feedback to improve learning efficiently and expediently’ (Sadler, 1989, p. 120). To summarise, formative feedback is feedback that improves learning. This improvement may be due to using the feedback to ‘close the gap’ between current performance and desired performance. When a student uses feedback to improve their learning, this requires them to ‘engage’ with the feedback.

Defining engagement with feedback

Research specifically focusing on engagement with feedback does not always define what is meant by 'engaging with feedback'. So in this chapter I am exploring this concept based on studies of engagement from three key perspectives: emotional, cognitive and constructivist. I will draw on the work of Fredericks *et al.*, (2004) who have evaluated the strengths, weaknesses and gaps in the literature on emotional and cognitive studies of engagement. To support this I will discuss a range of models that have been developed to explain the concept of engaging with feedback. A conceptual model or framework (Leshem & Trafford, 2007) is a diagram (Handley, 2007; Juwah *et al*., 2004) or written explanation (Sadler, 1989; Rust *et al*., 2005) which helps to explain a complex idea and in doing so generally helps to simplify the concept.

Emotional perspective

Emotional engagement 'encompasses positive and negative reactions and is presumed to… influence willingness to work' (Fredericks *et al*., 2004, p. 60). Furthermore, research on emotional engagement is related to that on students' attitudes (Fredericks *et al*., 2004, p. 60). The Handley model (2007 in Figure 3a) shows the feedback process. The attitude staff and students have towards feedback influences their responses to it. The model shows that the assignment brief is provided by the assessor. When staff set assignments and give feedback to students they are influenced by contextual factors, such as the traditions of the academic discipline and institutional policies. Staff responses to the assessment/feedback process may be, for example, gaining information about student progress or becoming disillusioned about students not collecting marked assignments. These responses influence staff styles of engagement with the assessment/feedback process and the quality of the feedback they provide and these in turn could affect a student's response.

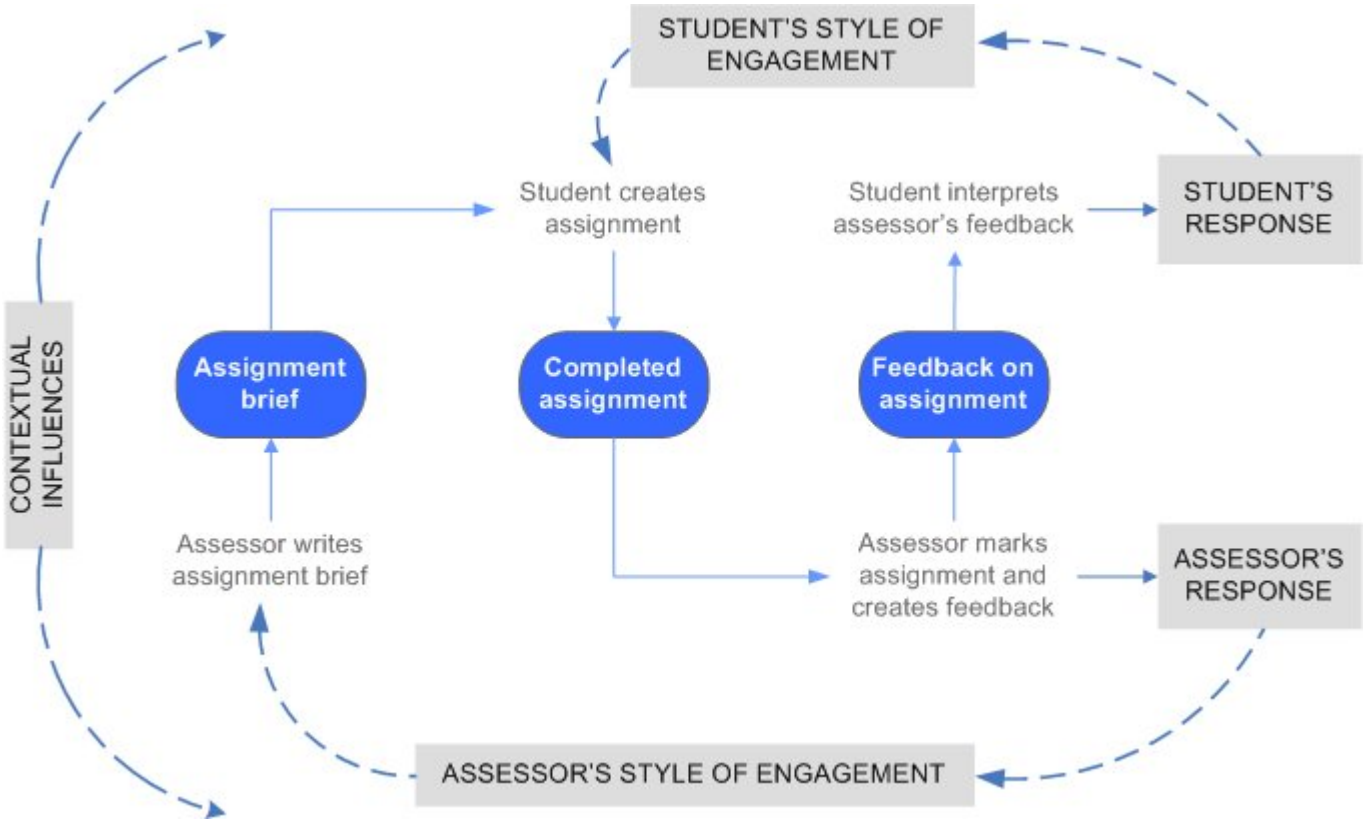


Figure 3a (Handley, 2007).

Handley model showing students' and assessors' styles of engagement

The model shows that any assessment/feedback episode has a response outcome for the student, for example satisfaction or confusion. A student's response may be immediate or longer-term, for example, a student's immediate reaction may be disappointment, followed later by a willingness to re-read the feedback and reflect on it. The response to the feedback may depend on their style of engagement, for example students who have high self-esteem respond more positively to feedback and students with lower levels of self-esteem may respond negatively towards feedback (Young, 2000). The Young (2000) study was a small-scale research project that looked at Access Students' responses to feedback on assignments through semi-structured interviews and a simple self-esteem scale. The Hattie & Timperley model (2007) also identifies that feedback is most effective when a learner's confidence in their ability to improve is high. Their model is based on a conceptual analysis of the meaning of feedback and a synthesis of the evidence related to the power of feedback to improve learning. They comment that when a learner's confidence in their own ability is low they may

ignore the feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Black & Wiliam, 2009). However, emotional engagement is only one way in which to define engagement. Therefore the Handley model (2007), the Young (2000) study and Hattie & Timperley's (2007) model identifying the different ways students deal emotionally with feedback do not explore the cognitive processes a student goes through to engage with their feedback.

Cognitive perspective

Cognitive models of engagement are related to the thought-processes a student needs to go through in order to develop and improve their skills. Cognitive engagement can be defined as the 'willingness to exert the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and master difficult skills' **(**Fredericks *et al*., 2004, p. 60). Engaging with feedback is one way in which a student could develop their learning through cognitive processes. Sadler's model is based on a cognitive model of engaging with feedback. Sadler's (1989) written model of feedback identifies this cognitive process as 'closing the gap'. Sadler's written model of feedback explains that feedback should provide information about the 'gap' between actual performance and desired performance. The feedback should then enable students to close the gap and improve their performance, moving it closer to the desired performance.

'The learner has to a) possess a concept of the standard (or goal, or reference level) being aimed for, b) compare the actual (or current) level of performance with the standard, c) engage in appropriate action which leads to some closure of the gap. These…are necessary conditions which must be satisfied simultaneously rather than as sequential steps.' (Sadler, 1989, p.121).

This model is very much about a holistic and active process of engagement. This requires students to make a clear amendment to their assignments, in which actual performance and desired performance are more closely aligned. The student needs to have an understanding of the goal for which they are aiming. However studies (Bloxham & West, 2004; Orsmond *et al.*, 2002) have shown that students often do not understand the criteria and standards for which they are pursuing. Therefore making a comparison of their actual performance with what they are aiming for is problematic for students. Sadler's later work (2005, 2009) and other studies (Price, 2005, Yorke & Knight, 2004) have also highlighted the difficulties encountered by staff when using assessment criteria in order to provide feedback. Sadler (2009, p. 168) queries 'if the giving of feedback to students by staff is influenced by their

interpretation of the criteria, what chance do students have of accurately interpreting criteria.' Therefore a student needs to overcome many hurdles before they can successfully engage with the feedback by 'closing the gap' based on Sadler's model (1989).

The Juwah *et al*., model (2004, figure 3b) is also based on cognitive learning theory and it characterises the process of engaging with feedback through external and internal processes. The external processes are the teacher setting the assignment and giving the student feedback. The internal processes of the student receiving feedback are split into five categories: firstly the student's level of knowledge and motivation, secondly is the student's goals, the third is their strategies for using feedback, the fourth their learning outcomes and the fifth is their performance. The Juwah *et al.,* (2004) model is developed in response to the theoretical ideas of self-regulated learning developed by Butler and Winne (1995).

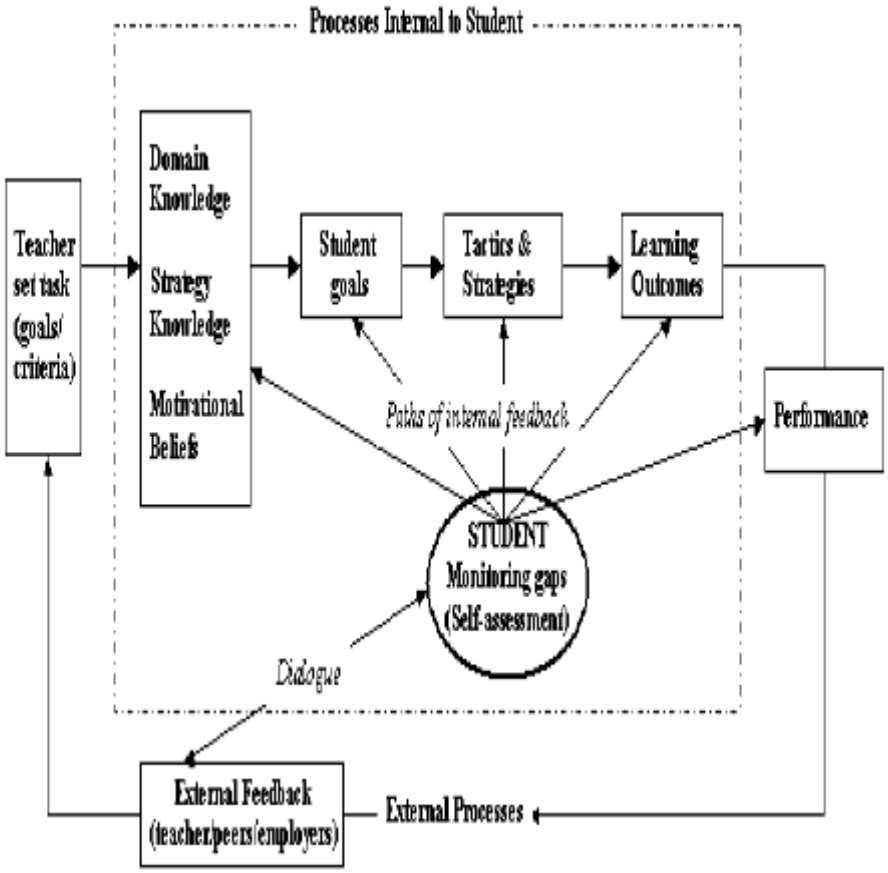


Figure 3b (Juwah *et al*., 2004, p.5) **A model of formative assessment and feedback**

A key aspect of cognitive learning is self- regulated learning, which suggests that individuals have control over their own learning and involves sustained effort and motivation; it also requires students to reflect on their learning in order to set their own goals. Butler and Winne's model of self-regulated learning is distilled from a spectrum of educational and psychological models of learning. They then used this synthesis as a structure for interpreting research findings about feedback and its effect on achievement. Therefore the Juwah *et al.* model is based on the theoretical work of others and is not based on their own empirical research findings. Additionally, the Butler & Winne's (1995) model was later revised by Winne & Hadwin (1998), so the Juwah *et al.* model is not based on their most recent model of self-regulated learning.

Hawk & Shah (2008) provide a revised feedback model based on the self-regulated model of Butler & Winne (1995). They argue, like others (Fredericks *et al*., 2004) that there has been an increasing emergence of research on learning from other perspectives and only considering the cognitive aspect of learning gives a narrow definition of engagement. The Hawk and Shah model (2008) is based on a synthesis of the research literature on feedback. Features of feedback, such as it being specific, timely and relevant are included in the model. Their model also incorporates a list of functions feedback can have, for example providing the student with additional information or replacing incorrect knowledge. This model of self-regulated learning is more detailed than the work of Butler & Winne (1995) and Juwah *et al.* (2004), but it still focuses on cognitive engagement with feedback and is not based on empirical research.

Although models of self-regulated learning generally focus on the learners thought processes, the Juwah *et al.,* model does highlight staff-student dialogue. The Juwah *et al.,* model indicates an arrow representing dialogue between the external feedback and the student. This dialogue represents a bridge between the external process of giving feedback and the internal process of the student receiving feedback. In their discussion of dialogue Juwah *et al.,* acknowledge the problems of providing dialogue under the modern university pressures of a growth in student numbers, such as a reduction in staff-student contact time. They use case-studies to identify potential ways of overcoming this problem, such as reporting feedback in class or using classroom technologies to collate student responses (Juwah *et al.*, 2004). These case-studies do transcend a transmission approach to feedback. However, these examples of

providing ‘dialogue’ are not the type of one-to-one dialogue advocated by a constructivist perspective.

Constructivist perspectives

Constructivist models actively encourage student-staff dialogues. Constructivist models of learning see knowledge and meaning as being generated from experiences and evolving through participation (Rust *et al.,* 2005). Rust *et al.,* (2005) adopt a social constructivist approach whereby learning is a social process in which meaning and understanding emerges through social encounters. Their model/framework is based on the research literature. They argue that if a social constructivist approach is applied to the assessment process many problems could be overcome. They describe what a social constructivist approach to assessment would look like and give practical examples from the research literature of ways it could be implemented. Social constructivist approaches have an emphasis on dialogue. Rust *et al.,* identify three main elements to a constructivist assessment process. Firstly, staff and students are involved in the development and implementation of assessment criteria, secondly they ensure that the assessment criteria are explicit and finally, students are actively engaged in the feedback process (Rust *et al.,* 2005, pp 233-5). Perhaps most significantly, Rust *et al.,* (2005) acknowledge the role that staff must play in facilitating student engagement with feedback, for example through one-to-one dialogue which they view as a collaborative process.

To summarise the literature review has identified that there is no single definition of engagement and that it is a multi-faceted concept. Nevertheless engagement with feedback can be influenced by a student’s emotional response to feedback (Handley, 2007). From Sadler’s model (1989) it has been identified that engaging with feedback is a process of closing the gap between current and desired performance. I agree that the purpose of feedback is to ‘close the gap’, rather than for example just reflecting on the feedback (Orsmond *et al.,* 2005; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The Juwah *et al.,* model (2004) identifies several internal cognitive processes that may influence a student’s engagement with feedback and the concept of self-regulated learning indicates that the responsibility for engaging with the feedback lies with the student. The Rust *et al.,* model (2005) contradicts this idea, arguing that staff should also play a role in student engagement with feedback, particularly arguing engagement with feedback should be a collaborative and dialogic

process. Like Rust *et al*., (2005) I take a constructivist stance to the feedback process and believe it should involve a staff-student dialogue to support closing the feedback loop.

All of the above models tell us something about the process of engagement with feedback or some of the factors that could influence it. However, the models discussed in the literature review are based on theoretical understandings of, for example, cognitive learning theories or are based on a synthesis of research literature which does not consider the student perspective. Therefore I argue that there is a gap in the literature, such as an empirical 'engaging with feedback' model. If I consider my research question 'What does engaging with feedback mean to students?' I am aware that the current literature on engaging with feedback does not address this question from the student perspective. Instead, the research identifies the potential engagement of students from a teacher/institutional stance. Furthermore, I feel that without an understanding of the subjective reality of students, we cannot fully capture the concept of engaging with feedback. I argue that this is imperative because we cannot really understand what engagement is or if engagement is taking place, if we do not measure it against the student definition of this concept.

Staff perspectives on engagement with feedback

Research focusing on the reasons students do not engage with feedback, often uses a student-deficit model, implying an inadequacy or fault on the part of the student, which prevents effective engagement with it. The staff perspective on student non- engagement with feedback can be categorised into four areas: students misunderstanding feedback, students being focused on grades only, students not having strategies to engage with feedback and students lacking motivation.

Misunderstanding feedback

The survey findings of Maclellan (2001) suggest that tutors believe academic terminology is understood by students. The 40 item questionnaire explored staff and student perceptions of the purpose of assessment, marking and reporting. There was a 100 per cent return rate from 130 third year undergraduates and 80 per cent return rate from staff totalling 100 questionnaires. It is argued by staff that students do not understand the feedback and this can be a huge barrier to using it (Weaver, 2006). When students do not understand the feedback due to the academic terminology used, they cannot respond to the advice (Chanock, 2000; Maclellan, 2001; Weaver, 2006). Ivanic *et al*., (2000) also argue that this failure to respond to

feedback is partly because students do not understand the 'expert' language of academic disciplines.

Grade orientation

Secondly, it has been argued that students' preoccupation with summative assessments does not encourage them to use formative feedback (Ecclestone, 1999). Duncan's (2007) practitioner based research identified reasons some students did not use tutor feedback, such as the grade was the important feedback and the feedback was only read if the grade was unexpected. The grades students receive are important to them as a guide to their final degree classification and this can make feedback peripheral to students. Staff believe if students are on target, students feel that there is no need to consider additional developmental comments (Prowse *et al.,* 2007). A grade-orientated approach is linked to the issue of uncollected feedback. When students have on-line access to grades, there is less impetus to collect written feedback from the tutor, if the student is satisfied with their grade. Winter and Dye (2005) argue that this may have consequences for student learning, because students are unable to capitalise on any feedback or commentary provided by the tutor. However, if students do not understand how to utilise the feedback, it is unlikely the feedback will have a significant impact

Using the feedback

Thirdly, students' ability to use feedback without any support is questionable. Burke (2009) found strategies for 'using' feedback were severely lacking. The research based on 358 questionnaires with students showed that the majority of staff did not provide guidance for students' on how to use feedback, other than to read the comments. Weaver's study (2006, p. 385) showed fifty per cent of students at university had never been given guidance on 'how to understand and use feedback.' Additionally, three – quarters of students had not received any guidance on using feedback prior to university. The finding that students are not supported in using their feedback will inevitably impact upon their likelihood of engaging with feedback.

Motivation

Finally, it is argued by staff that student behaviour towards feedback can have implications for their wider learning experience (Dweck, 2000). Indeed some staff may hold 'a deficiency model of student behaviour, in which the blame for inadequate academic performance is attributed wholly to the student' (Entwistle, in Ramsden, 2003, p.13). If a student perceives

their intelligence to be a fixed trait which cannot be developed, challenging tasks will be responded to in a negative way. This type of response has been classed as 'helpless' by Dweck (2000). Conversely, a love of learning, challenges and valuing hard work form the mould for producing successful learners. This suggests that students who have an incremental theory of intelligence are much more motivated to develop and improve their learning by engaging with feedback. An incremental theory of intelligence can be defined as the belief intelligence can be developed through learning. 'We call this an "incremental theory" of intelligence because intelligence is portrayed as something that can be increased through one's efforts...they focus on the idea that everyone, with effort and guidance, can increase their intellectual abilities' (Dweck, 2000. p. 3).

Strategies for increasing engagement with feedback

Despite the strong focus of much assessment research on trying to explain students' lack of engagement with feedback, few studies have discussed the impact of specific features of written feedback on student engagement. Consequently, several authors have recommended certain practices to ensure that formative feedback is provided effectively and that it can therefore benefit student learning. Nicol and Macfarlane - Dick (2006, p. 203) identified 'seven principles of good feedback practice'. They recognise, for example, the impact that feedback can have on students. They therefore encourage motivational elements in order to prevent damage to self-esteem and they also focus on encouraging dialogue. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) identified eleven conditions relating to the design of assessment systems and assignments and their influence on study, such as ensuring that tackling the assessed task engages the student in a productive learning activity and that feedback is acted upon. However, these frameworks do not take into account the other reasons for giving feedback, such as meeting the criteria of external auditors (Randall & Mirador, 2003). Therefore, the recommended formative feedback processes may not be the main function of the feedback received by students, making it difficult for them to engage with it.

Furthermore, assessment design often only encourages an optional response to feedback (Orrell, 2006). This is not a problem of student motivation, but an omission in educational design with students rarely being required to reflect critically and act on feedback. Currently, feedback is a postscript to learning due to a failure to construe assessment and feedback as pivotal (Orrell, 2006). Not engaging with feedback could be more about the student experience of the assessment system, rather than their own individual attitude towards

learning, for example students often have an unequal position in the feedback process (Sadler, 1998; Hyland, 2000). Furthermore, it is argued that if students are exposed to poor quality feedback over a period of time they will adapt their behaviour accordingly, such as by making little attempt to engage with the feedback (Sadler, 2005). Sadler suggests that students often have no control over the type of feedback they receive and that it may have limited formative potential. This raises the pertinent point that student engagement with feedback is influenced not only by their attitude towards learning, but also by their experience of the assessment system. A number of initiatives have been developed by academics to bring formative feedback to the forefront of student learning (Juwah *et al.*, 2004).

How is formative feedback provided?

Formative feedback can be provided in a variety of ways. An understanding of the ways formative feedback is provided is particularly important when considering my research question 'What are the factors that promote/prevent engagement with feedback?' as the style and delivery of feedback are likely to impact upon this. It can be provided by a teacher to inform the learning and understanding of their students. It can also be generated by a student, either on their own work through self – assessment or by others, for example by peer assessment**.** Formative feedback can be written feedback provided to individual students, it can be verbal feedback provided to individual students or a class of students. Feedback processes have also developed with technology, therefore feedback may be provided electronically, for example via email and Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) systems or through sound files (Merry & Orsmond, 2008). Thus formative feedback can be provided in a range of ways to help students develop and improve their learning. Yet, regardless of how formative feedback is provided, in order for it to be effective, students need to engage with it.

Suggestions have been made as to how feedback can be formulated to allow students to use it effectively. The current research suggests that for this to be achieved, students need to understand the feedback and have an opportunity to engage with it. Gibbs & Simpson (2004) suggested several ways of getting students to engage with feedback, such as asking what they would like feedback on, providing feedback without a grade and self-assessing to align views with those of the tutor. Additionally, students need support in developing the confidence to meet their tutor to discuss feedback. This would require tutors to reconsider their practice in

order to increase student engagement with feedback and also to reflect on how the diverse backgrounds of students can impact on their engagement with feedback.

Smaller 'chunks'

Yorke & Knight (2004) argue that 'non-traditional' students may be disproportionately lacking in self belief, requiring tutors to reconsider the design of tasks and to use greater sensitivity in providing feedback. They suggest that smaller 'chunks' of work may be initially less overwhelming. Yorke and Thomas (2003) have recommended a shift towards formative assessment, particularly for the very first pieces of work students do and this serves two key purposes. Firstly it means that students can be guided into the expectations of higher education, and secondly it removes the burden of 'failure' at this early stage, when students are trying to cope with a range of demands that are not just academic. Hanson (1998 in Young, 2000) also suggests that because the earliest assignments cause students the greatest concern, the feedback should be prompt and not too much significance should be attached to the task. Yorke & Knight (2004) contend that higher education institutions actively involved in widening participation and/ or increasing retention should focus on the quality of the feedback that first year students receive and give these ideas serious consideration in the development of an assessment strategy.

Peer feedback

Students can also be helped to develop strategies that are not tutor led to increase engagement with feedback. Peer feedback allows students to develop concepts of standards and criteria (Liu and Carless, 2006) and provides a way for tutors to encourage student engagement with feedback. Liu and Carless (2006) awarded twenty - five per cent of assignment marks on a module for the quality of the peer marking. This provided an extra incentive for students to think carefully about the assessment criteria and the feedback process. However, even without clear motivating incentives Bloxham and West (2004) found that students recognise the benefits of peer marking for their own learning development. Peer assessment has also been recognised for its potential in increasing student engagement through a greater level of reflection and analysis by students besides a greater understanding of assessment criteria (Liu and Carless, 2006; Bloxham and West, 2004; 2007).

Van den Berg *et al.* (2006) researched seven different writing courses which all had an element of peer feedback associated with the evaluation of assignments. Analysis of their

findings suggest that for peer feedback to be effective assessments should be conducted in a small feedback group, written feedback should be explained orally and discussed with the receiver of the feedback. The research of Vickerman (2009) into peer feedback found that students valued the experience and felt that it gave them a better understanding of the assessment process. Although the evidence suggests that strategies such as peer assessment increase student engagement with feedback, more needs to be known about the student perspective in this area. If students only experience peer assessment on one module in isolation from the rest of their study, it may be difficult to sustain this increased level of engagement in other modules.

Employability focused feedback

A study by Cassidy (2006) used peer assessment as a potential strategy for developing employability skills. He found that students wanted feedback to focus on aspects of their writing in terms of employability skills. However, he also argued that of the skills that employers were looking for, writing would not be top of the list. The focus of his study was on peer assessment and its potential both to develop transferable skills and to encourage students to think about the quality of their own work. Boud (2006) also argues that the short term focus on assessment in higher education should be balanced against the longer term aims of assessment: that is encouraging students to have a learning-orientated approach to employment after graduation. It is likely that a range of transferable skills could be drawn from the practice of peer feedback, such as analysis, independent learning and communication.

To summarise, the research findings for why staff feel students do not engage effectively with formative feedback have been derived from a limited range of approaches. Researchers often use an underlying student deficit perspective. Such research suggests that there is something lacking on the part of the student, for example a problem with understanding, a poor approach to learning and/or a lack of motivation. Within this perspective is an underlying assumption that the formative feedback students receive matches the principles set out by, for example Nicol and Macfarlane – Dick (2006). The perceived problems of students not engaging with feedback can be counteracted in several ways. The use of smaller assessment tasks for first year undergraduates with a focus on formative, rather than summative feedback may help students to engage with feedback within a supportive learning environment. Peer feedback may also increase student engagement with feedback as it helps

them to understand assessment criteria and to reflect more deeply on their own assignment when exposed to the work of their peers. Finally, the skills developed from giving peer feedback may be of particular interest to students when they consider its potential in increasing their future employability. However, more research needs to be conducted in these areas from the student perspective.

Student perspectives on engaging with feedback

Students are often dissatisfied with feedback (National Student Survey, 2007; 2008). However, the lack of research pertaining to student perceptions on feedback is highlighted by Brown (2007) and Poulos & Mahony (2007). Where such research into students' responses to feedback has been conducted (Higgins *et al*., 2002; Orsmond *et al*., 2005), the findings contrast with the large body of research conducted from the staff perspective, suggesting students value feedback.

Dissatisfied with feedback

Recent research by Brown (2007) used twenty semi-structured interviews in a business school in a Scottish university. His findings highlighted that although students are generally happy with the feedback that they receive, they do have some worries about the consistency between the feedback comments and the summative grade on assignments. Additionally, students voiced their frustration at the lack of feedback that was available to them on examination scripts. Poulos and Mahony (2007) also focused on student perceptions, but more specifically on what students perceived to be 'effective feedback'. The study involved four focus groups in different years of study, all studying Health-related degrees at an Australian University. The findings that emerged showed that students' perceptions of the effectiveness of feedback extended beyond the mode of delivery and timeliness of the feedback, to include the 'credibility of the lecturer giving the feedback' (p.145). Rhodes and Nevill (2004) conducted a study which included a survey of 185 sport and education students. Their study was not specifically about students' perspectives on feedback, but they did identify a pertinent finding in relation to this area. On the survey question item about the student experience relating to 'quality of feedback on my work' students acknowledged this as being important, but 45 students also stated that their experience of this was 'deeply dissatisfying' (p. 186). The authors expressed concerns over this finding, especially in

relation to the work of Young (2000) who highlighted the role in which feedback plays in self-esteem and motivation of students.

Valuing feedback

Students' responses to written formative feedback were investigated by Higgins *et al.*, (2002). They collated 94 questionnaires from first year Business and Humanities students across a pre 1992 and post 1992 university. They also conducted 19 semi-structured interviews across the two subjects within the two universities with the participants being diverse in terms of age, background and gender. They asked students a range of questions about their responses to feedback, for example how much time they spent reading it and their feedback preferences. Higgins *et al.*, (2002) found that:

- 97% of students in the sample read feedback, with 82% paying close attention to it (p.57).

- Students said that they referred to feedback for two main reasons- it was only fair that they got feedback (having done the work) and they found it helpful (p.58).

- Students' attitudes towards feedback are connected with their perception that they are recipients of a service (education) and that feedback is part of the service (p.59).

However, Higgins *et al*., (2002) argue that students' perceptions of feedback are not just influenced by their focus on grades. When they analysed students' preferences they found that comments which focused on critical analysis and arguments and which explained mistakes were rated by 90% of students as being important, in comparison to 92% who valued comments on grades. The similarity in the two percentages suggests that students value the more complex feedback comments about their work and are not solely motivated by grades or a consumerist attitude towards their education. Where students were set both formal formative and summative assessment in the form of coursework, they particularly valued the feedback given on the formative work, recognising that it could help them to improve. This suggests that students do recognise the potential benefits of formative feedback to their learning.

A study by Orsmond *et al.,* (2005) also provides evidence that students value feedback. For example, they interviewed 20 students about the feedback that they received on assignments. Twelve students claimed to read and reread feedback. Five students went even further and carried copies of assignments containing specific feedback around with them or saved specific feedback so that this could be referred to when needed. Orsmond *et al.,* (2005) concluded from their analysis that students showed real commitment to improving their learning or grades and that they viewed feedback as one way in which this could be achieved. Furthermore, informal conversations with their tutors further encouraged student learning (Orsmond *et al.,* 2002). This suggests that students do value feedback and try to engage with it and that this engagement is particularly enhanced through dialogue with lecturers.

In summary, the literature from the student perspective (Orsmond *et al.*, 2005; Higgins *et al.*, 2002; Brown, 2007; Poulos & Mahony, 2007) suggests that students value feedback and in many cases take steps to actively engage with feedback to improve their learning; although the number of studies focusing on their perspective is limited. Therefore, I think my research question 'What is the student perspective on engagement with feedback' is still an important question, as further research in this area will add to the existing body of knowledge. Although these studies suggest that they focus on the student perspective, essentially the data analysis is still shaped by the practitioner researchers who conducted them. My research addresses this issue of a gap in methodological knowledge of how the data is analysed so that my data analysis attempts to authentically represent the student perspective (see Chapter 5, research design).

Summary of the literature review

To summarise, this literature review has identified within the context of higher education, the possible benefits formative feedback can have on improving student learning. The first section included definitions of formative feedback, for example as 'formative feedback is targeted feedback to improve learning efficiently and expediently' (Sadler, 1989, p. 120). The second section identifies engaging with feedback as both a process to be carried out by the student individually and collaborative process between staff and students and evaluates models of engaging with feedback. The third section of the literature review examined the ways in which some staff use student-deficit approaches when discussing student engagement with feedback and some of the strategies, such as peer feedback, that have been developed to increase levels of engagement. The fourth section then looked at the more limited available

literature which focuses specifically on the student perspective. Research conducted from the student perspective suggests that students are unhappy with the quality of feedback that they receive, but at the same time feedback is valued and students do attempt to engage with it where possible. The final section of the literature review ends by focusing on areas where my research could add to the body of literature, through my amended research questions and my research focus.

Amended research questions

The questions I set out to address through my review of the literature were:

- What is the student perspective on engaging with feedback?
- What does engaging with feedback mean to students?
- What are the factors that promote/prevent engagement with feedback?

Whilst the literature tackles these questions to some extent, there are also gaps and limitations in the studies reviewed. These gaps raised further questions, particularly around students' beliefs and understandings of feedback and engagement, and the implications of this for students, teachers, policy and practice. In this final section of the chapter I review each question in turn and identify the supplementary questions which address the gaps in our knowledge of student engagement with feedback and which form the basis of my main study.

What is the student perspective on engaging with feedback?

After reviewing the literature, I think the research question 'What is the student perspective on engagement with feedback?' is still an important question, as further research in this area will add to the limited body of knowledge. Students' beliefs about feedback have not been examined in great detail and we still do not know what meanings students attach to the feedback and what role (if any) they feel feedback plays in their learning. The literature makes recommendations of what good feedback should look like (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Gibbs & Simpson, 2004), however these recommendations have been aimed at teachers and do not necessarily take into account what students believe is good feedback. Furthermore research from the student perspective tends to focus on the 'poor' feedback that students are dissatisfied with, such as 36 per cent of students in the National Student Survey (2008) saying that feedback was inadequate. Therefore, I think it is important to our understanding of

student engagement with feedback to know what meanings and purposes students attach to feedback and their beliefs about 'good' feedback.

What does engaging with feedback mean to students?

There are a wide range of models developed from the teacher perspective focusing on engagement with feedback (Handley, 2007; Sadler, 1989; Juwah *et al*., 2004; Rust *et al.*, 2005) which all have a different emphasis. Nevertheless, the key issue within all these theoretical models is 'closing the feedback loop'. However, research has suggested that there may be differences between staff and students in their beliefs about the role of feedback in learning (Maclellan, 2001, p. 316). These potential differences in shared cultural understandings between staff and students mean it is important to identify 'What does engaging with feedback mean to students?' Thus in addressing my original question I will also add the supplementary question 'How do students characterise 'good' engagement with feedback? 'By doing this, I hope to reach a greater understanding of the culture of engagement from the student perspective.

What are the factors that promote/prevent engagement with feedback?

The research has highlighted factors that promote engagement with feedback, such as peer assessment (Liu & Carless, 2006) and also factors that prevent engagement with feedback, such as lowered self-esteem due to negative feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). I think it is still of value for my research to focus on the factors that promote and prevent engagement with feedback, especially from the student point of view. Furthermore, I feel that it will be beneficial to go one step further with this empirical research and identify if there are any wider, contextual implications of feedback supporting or hindering learning. Current studies have identified that engagement with feedback can be improved (or not) depending on the practices used, however I think it is important to consider what impact this has on students' experiences of university overall and the potential implications of this for teachers and policy and practice in higher education.

To summarise, I think it is important for my research questions to clearly differentiate themselves from the staff perspective. I feel that these revised questions more closely articulate a focus on the student perspective, which is currently limited in the research literature on engagement with feedback. So having reflected on my original research questions in light of reviewing the literature the following questions now seem appropriate:

1. What is the student perspective on feedback?

1a. What meanings and purposes do students' attach to feedback?

1b. What do students think is 'good' feedback?

2. What does *engaging* with feedback mean to students?

2a. How do students characterise 'good' *engagement* with feedback?

3. What are the factors that promote/prevent engagement with feedback?

3a. What are the implications of this for students and teachers, policy and practice across the university sector?

I felt that these questions best reflected my amended research focus. I am looking specifically at the student perspective on feedback. Also, I think it is important for students to evaluate engagement with feedback in their own terms because I do not believe that this concept has been problematised or considered from the student perspective. I felt that differences in meaning and culture might be an issue between the apparent mismatch of staff and student views of engaging with feedback. However, as of yet, this has not really been explored. I wanted to also consider the factors that promote/ prevent engagement with the feedback from the students' perspectives and how this influences their broader university experience.

My focus

In conclusion, the literature review reveals that there is a lack of engagement by students with feedback, which justifies the need for further research in this area. Practitioners' explanations of students' lack of engagement with formative feedback are often characterised by a student deficit perspective. Undertaking research from the student perspective will be valuable in adding to the research literature due to the limited literature on the student perspective. Giving the students' a voice in the context of feedback, may lead to a greater understanding of their perspectives on engaging with feedback. The concept of engagement in the literature is itself theorised from a teacher/institutional perspective and does not allow for shared understandings of engaging with feedback between staff and students. I feel that undertaking this research will allow for the development of a model which focuses on the student view, as

the conceptual models that have been created are not empirical and do not necessarily represent the student outlook.

Chapter 4: Methodology

In this methodology chapter I discuss the principles and values that underpin my research and explain the decisions I have taken. As Miller & Bell (in Mauthner *et al.*, 2002, p. 54) point out, 'the course of a project may only be guessed at initially.' In this sense, this chapter does not pretend that the empirical aspect of the research was a straightforward process; instead it chronologically represents the methodological journey my research has taken. This chapter is divided into six sections. The first section discusses the background of the project and explains why I originally undertook this research. The second section presents the action research methodology used in the background study and reflects on its suitability for the main study. The third section focuses on my beliefs as a researcher and how they evolved. The fourth section explains how the findings from the background study further influenced my search for an alternate methodology. The fifth section discusses the principles of a feminist approach to interviewing which underpins the main study. The final section discusses trustworthiness, dependability and validity.

Background

The findings from the background study were intended to be used as the basis for a piece of action research to improve student engagement with feedback. An action research methodology was deemed appropriate for two reasons. Firstly the original project which gave me the opportunity to do this study had initially been designed by senior members of staff working with the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL). Secondly, I could see that action research was an established methodology for investigating engagement with feedback having read the literature on feedback research. Consequently, it seemed appropriate for the project to build upon existing work in this area.

Action research

The concept of action research is explained through doing experiments in the field, rather than the laboratory. It is attributed to the work of the Social Psychologist Lewin (1946) who developed the original cyclical model (in Somekh, 2006, p.12) and also Dewey's (1944) philosophy of education (in Somekh, 2006, p. 12). Action research is a popular approach for improving educational experiences because 'action' is based on empirical findings and is intended to have a transformative impact (Somekh, 2006, p. 7). The stages within the action

research cycle are reconnaissance, planning, preliminary research, formulating research question, implementing, observing, recording and reflecting (Cousin, 2009, pp.157-158). The cyclical nature of action research offers opportunities for comparative data to be measured over time, giving a strong sense of reliability and validity within the research findings (Reason and Bradbury, 2006).

I considered the cyclical nature of other pieces of action research within the area of assessment and feedback (Swann & Ecclestone, 1999; Torrance & Pryor, 2001; Munns & Woodward, 2006), to help me understand what stages my own project should undertake. Swann & Ecclestone (1999) clearly explained the stages of action research their project undertook. Initially, they identified two key issues with teachers' assessment practices: a lack of consistency in grading students' assignments and feedback comments were not effective in improving students' learning. In an attempt to improve the assessment practices, they went through a series of questions and statements to formulate each stage of their action research.

- What aspects of assessment do we want to change? (reconnaissance)
- What seems to be preventing these desired changes? (reconnaissance)
- Which impediments are within our control to change? (planning)
- Formulation of tentative theories on how to make these changes (formulating research question)
- Select a trial solution (implementing)
- Decide how to measure success (or not) of trial solution (observing and recording)
- Carry out a review process. Any positive/negative effects on assessment? Any unintended consequences? Would other strategies been more effective? (reflection)

(Adapted from Swann & Ecclestone, 1999, p.69)

Based on these research stages I then planned my own cycle of how I thought the action research for my project should progress. However, I also needed to consider what form of action research I could and should take. In the next section I outline the underpinning principles of two different approaches to action research (reflective and technical) and evaluate both for my own piece of action research.

Approaches to action research

Action research has historically adopted the approach of practitioner as 'doer' in the fields of educational research (Zuber - Skerritt, 2002). This has encouraged improving educational practice by enabling practitioners to be in control of the research (Kemmis, in Reason and Bradbury, 2006). Reflective action research is very much about the practitioner being in control and making changes to their own practice. The practitioner can then reflect upon the impact of these changes for themselves and their students. However, technical action research is often instigated by a facilitator not the practitioner. Technical action research tries to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of practice. Furthermore, technical action research is often measured by the facilitator's criteria and tends not to involve the practitioner in this process.

A popular action research methodology combines reflective and technical aspects (Torrance and Pryor, 2001; Munns and Woodward, 2006; Swann & Ecclestone,1999). In this scenario a team of researchers work closely with a team of practitioners enabling them to collectively identify where and how changes to practices could be made. After implementing these changes practitioners are then able to reflect upon the effectiveness of these changes before implementing any additional alterations in the next cycle. Swann & Ecclestone (1999) and Munns & Woodward (2006) in their projects used a collaborative approach using several teachers from different schools to be action researchers on their project. The authors themselves acted as facilitators and co-ordinators within the project. It was hoped that all teachers involved in the project would attend meetings, develop and test ideas within their own practice and contribute to guidelines and materials for other teachers.

Reflections on the approaches to action research

I decided a technical approach to the action research would be most suitable for my project because this would allow me to suggest the lecturer make practical changes to her module, for example the lecturer could give verbal feedback instead of written or she could change the style of feedback comments. I had anticipated that the data I collected at the preliminary research stage would provide a base line from which I could then compare student engagement with feedback before and after the lecturer had implemented the technical changes. Therefore, I expected to assess the impact of changes on student engagement with feedback through my own criteria. So in my technical approach to action research I had taken away the opportunity for reflection by the 'practitioner as doer'. The action research cycle encourages the practitioner implementing change (in this instance assessment practices) to

reflect on the effectiveness of these alterations and based on this further amendments may be made to the initiative. However, as a researcher working with a practitioner *I* was reflecting on the changes required and suggesting ways to implement improvements. This approach did not conform to the original ideals of action research in which practitioners are at the centre of reflecting on the initiative they have implemented. I was suggesting to the module leader a range of changes to be made to the assessment and feedback practices and I would then evaluate the impact of these changes. In this sense my use of action research did not conform to its traditional principles. Instead I was shaping the action research through collaborating with the lecturer to improve assessment practices.

A key tenet of action research is that it is not done on people, but *with* people (Cousin, 2009**,** p.151). The students' views about the feedback on the module and the reasons that they did or did not engage with it would be a significant part of the reconnaissance stage. I hoped that their perspective on the feedback would influence the technical changes that I aimed to encourage the lecturer to make on the module. Furthermore, I could not move forward without the support of the lecturer because alterations to the module were at her discretion. Even though I recognised the importance of involving the students and module leader in the research, I did not feel I could adhere to the principles of emancipatory action research. I could not guarantee that I had enough power myself to improve the students' experiences of feedback through greater social justice.

Implementation of my action research approach

Implementing a methodology can be a complex process, in my case three issues: communication problems, differences in expectations and changing priorities prevented successful use of action research. When using a technical approach to action research I think it is important to recognise the significance of communication between the practitioner and the researcher if it is to proceed successfully. It is very clear to me now that I had not communicated my thoughts about what type of action research I felt was most appropriate and feasible, nor had we discussed how all collaborators in this venture felt about it.

My expectations and the module leader's were not entirely clear or compatible. I realised, perhaps too late, that for the researcher and practitioner to work effectively together on a piece of action research, clear expectations and guidelines are needed. At the outset of the

project I had not given due consideration to the need for trust, respect and openness between me as the researcher and the module leader as practitioner. I underestimated the issues of power, control and reputation that made both parties feel vulnerable and exposed at times. Somekh, also reflected on a similar experience in her PALM (Pupil Autonomy in Learning with Microcomputers) project whose original impetus did not come from the teachers with whom she was working, but outside agencies. This initially created difficulties with her project as different parties had different expectations about the research (2006, p. 96). Differences in expectations about research from different parties can emerge in any type of research and is not specific to action research.

Around this point the situation was further complicated by a change in the module leader's priorities. She now wanted to join a different research team to redevelop her module for a piece of research focusing on blended learning, rather than use the module for action research on feedback practices. My original aim had been to help module leaders improve the nature and method of providing feedback to students. I was not the main protagonist of 'action', but I collaborated with tutors to guide and advise them. This interpretation of action research can be likened to the example used by McNiff (1988) in which an lecturer in Education advised two teacher's on implementing the use of historical artefacts in the classroom: 'The researcher's implementation is of his own solution to the problem of finding a demonstrably effective way of helping teachers to introduce innovation and to improve the quality of their pupil's education' (McNiff, 1988, p. 61). I too had aimed to improve the quality of learning through the development of feedback practices through a partnership between myself as an external researcher and the module leader. However, with the module being chosen to be redeveloped as part of another project this meant that the outcomes of any action research that I had conducted could not be evaluated. Realistically I now knew I had very little power to actually change feedback practices because I was not a lecturer on a module or a member of management who could instigate changes to feedback policy. I felt that having a PhD student researching feedback practices was more about impression-management, rather than a genuine attempt to improve the student experience. But my priorities had also shifted. I was now less interested in improving the system of feedback per se. I had become much more interested in understanding the students' experiences and perceptions of feedback. I felt that the opportunities given to researchers to disseminate their findings would enable me to give voice to students' concerns and that this in turn might lead to changes and improvements as a result of a greater understanding of the student perspective. Several students had also

commented to me that they hoped my research would influence changes in feedback processes and I hoped that in some small way, raising the consciousness of tutors to the students' experiences of the feedback process would bring about positive improvements in assessment and feedback. It was at this stage, at the end of the first year when the background study had been completed, that the module leader and I agreed that I would take a different approach to investigating student engagement with feedback. I would still use the module as a basis for recruiting participants, but I would reconsider the methodology based on my own beliefs as a researcher and the findings from the background study, instead of redeveloping the module for a piece of action research. Action research was still an appropriate methodology for my project. However it was a failure of communication, mismatched expectations and changed priorities that prevented continuing with an action research methodology.

My beliefs as a researcher

I now felt in more control of the project and that I could shape my research based upon my own beliefs. I now perceived myself as having ownership of the project and with that mixed feelings of anticipation and responsibility in effectively shaping the research. At the same time, I felt somewhat abandoned by the original project proposal leaders and that I was now left on my own to complete the research. I view the purpose of qualitative research as describing and interpreting phenomena to identify shared meanings and that these meanings are significant in understanding participants' perspectives (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). As a researcher I believe all views are subjective and that they are mediated by an individual's experience of life and consciously or unconsciously these experiences are influenced by class, gender, ethnicity and age among other things. I recognise and consider the impact that my own identity can have on participants when conducting research. For example, as a young white woman with a working class background and as a former teacher my identity may unintentionally influence the research participants as they acknowledge the similarities between us, such as age, gender and social class, and also the differences, for example ethnicity and career experiences. 'The interpretive bricoleur (or maker of quilts), understands that the research is an interactive process shaped by his or her own personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, ethnicity and by those of the people in the setting' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.6). I take an interpretive stance in that I view all perspectives as partial truths and do not believe that there is one truth. However, that does not mean I want to

consider all perspectives as being equally valid, instead I am consciously focusing on one perspective, that of the students. To summarise, my own understanding and interpretation of the world is closely aligned to the interpretive paradigm. 'Paradigms are a set of beliefs which have particular epistemological and ontological values' (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p.105). As with social research, education research paradigms can be broadly categorized into positivist and interpretive.

The undertaking of an interpretive approach belies the belief that students' actions are a response to the social reality in which they find themselves (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Humans are reflexive and react according to the situations in which they find themselves in relation to the beliefs and assumptions which they hold. As an interpretive researcher I cannot accept the idea of there being a reality 'out there' which exists irrespective of people, but believe that reality is a construct of the human mind. People perceive and so construct the world in ways which are often similar but not necessarily the same. So there can be different interpretations of what is real. Concepts of reality can vary from one person to another. Instead of reality being 'out there', it is the observers who are 'out there'. They are part of the world which they are observing and so, by observing, may change what they are trying to observe. I recognise that by asking questions or by conducting observations I may influence the situation I am researching. I became more conscious of this when I started interviewing participants. This led me to consider how my identity and subjectivity as a researcher could influence the research. Due to this I kept notes about the interviewing process and any factors (including myself) which I felt could have impacted on the participants. The interpretive researcher recognises that the rationality of one observer may not be the same as the rationality of another, and so accepts that when these two observers talk to each other the world may not be 'rational' and 'make sense'. The interpretive researcher sees language as a more-or-less agreed symbolic system, in which different people may have some differences in their meanings, in consequence the sharing of accounts of what has been observed is always to some extent problematic. Because of the differences in perception, in interpretation and in language, it is not surprising that people have different views on what is real (Marshall, 1998).

An interpretivist epistemology and ontology

To summarise my researcher beliefs reflect an interpretivist epistemology which emphasizes understanding the meaning of the social world from the perspective of the actor (Finch, 1986). An epistemology is a framework or theory for specifying the constitution and generation of knowledge about the social world, that is how to understand the nature of reality. Epistemology can be integrated into the research process in several ways: 'In the researcher/researched relationship, emotion as an aspect of the research process, unpacking conceptualizations of objectivity and subjectivity, intellectual biography, processes by which understanding and conclusions are reached, existence and management of different realities by researcher and researched and issues surrounding authority and power' (Stanley and Wise, 1993, p. 189). As an interpretivist researcher I believe that all social knowledge is generated as a part and a product of human social experience. My ontological assumptions are students' perceptions of tutor feedback, are shaped by their lived experiences. The questions which my research addresses are specifically about the students' experiences. This in itself is an assumption because the views of, for example, tutors giving the feedback may be very different. It is acknowledged in this research that a specific view of social reality from a specific body of people will be obtained. Based on the social reality of the participants in my background study, the three aspects of valid knowledge which my research is most concerned with are issues concerning power, voice and the researcher/researched relationship.

As a Sociology undergraduate I had been interested in research which had focused on power and the researcher/researched relationship. For example, I was strongly influenced by the work of several feminist pieces of research, such as Arlie Hochschild's (1983) work on emotional labour and Sallie Westwood's (1984) work on female factory workers, because their research documented the marginalisation experienced by their participants and their responses to the power differentials within their situation. I also knew that feminist research has a strong tradition in education research, particularly when focusing on female experiences of education (Sharp & Green, 1975; Weiner, 1994) including higher education research (Morley & Walsh, 1996). Now as a postgraduate researcher of student engagement with feedback, these feminist studies, with their focus on power and oppression, began to resonate with my own research. I returned to my background study to see to what extent a feminist inspired methodology would be appropriate.

I had uncovered issues from my interviews with students that were beyond the scope of the original proposal. I now had an opportunity to use a methodology not typically used in feedback research, but which reflected the issues which emerged from the background study. After interviewing students in the background study I was disappointed by their negative experiences of feedback (see Chapter 2: background study for more detail about the research findings), such as critical feedback damaging their self-esteem and the belief that assignments were just *'playing a game'* to give the lecturer what they wanted. Their experiences had highlighted a set of power issues that I had not previously considered.

Power

The findings from the background study suggested that students believe academics are in a more privileged position than students and that lecturers have control over the feedback that students receive. In reality, lecturers are subordinate to the requirements of the University, such as monitorial surveillance by internal and external examination boards (Randall & Mirador, 2003). Additionally feedback may have to reflect institutional practices, such as justifying the grade awarded (Randall & Mirador, 2003, p.516). However, my background study findings suggest that within the context of higher education students feel that they can be poorly served in relation to their experiences of feedback. The students in my study believed that in order to be successful they needed to meet the demands of lecturers who held a dominant position over their 'success'.

I wanted to highlight the differentials of power between students and the staff providing feedback because of how students described how this issue affected their engagement with feedback. Power can be defined 'as the process which through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens or reverses' (Foucault, 1977, p.107). I hoped by addressing the issue of power within the feedback research it would encourage a shift within this balance of power. This desire to highlight these power differentials was politically motivated as I had become aligned with the students and I wanted to raise staff consciousness to the experience of students. Undergraduates are an articulate group of people with privileged educational opportunities, who also have their own union and ways of expressing their opinions. However, it was apparent from their perspective that the unequal position they experienced in relation to staff left them feeling subordinate and disadvantaged in terms of assessment and feedback. As Lillis (2001, p. 36) argues:

‘In the context of higher education, there is a need to explore the ways in which the existing institutional discursive practices are ideologically motivated, by exploring, for example the ways in which they serve to exclude and include individuals from particular social groups. The accounts of ‘non-traditional’ students are important in this respect in that, as participants who often most strongly experience a sense of dissonance with prevailing practices, they are easily able to problematise the ‘given’ status of such practices’.

I felt that in focusing on the student perspective, my methodology should acknowledge the limited power students believed they had within this assessment and feedback context. Feminist approaches to research seemed to be worth consideration, as they are concerned with the wider structural context in which particular groups experience less power. What makes research ‘feminist’ is not the methods that are used by the researchers, but the framework within which they are located, and the particular ways in which they are deployed (Kelly *et al*,. 1994, p. 46). Rather than focusing on women as a marginalised group within society, I wanted to focus on students who feel subordinate in relation to assessment and feedback within the context of higher education.

Voice

Feminist approaches to research have an emphasis on understanding the social and cultural contexts of events as well as the events themselves, whilst maintaining a commitment to sensitively broadcasting the ‘voice’ of those being researched (Ramazanoglu, 2002). By voice I mean ‘maintaining the integrity of the phenomena and preserving the viewpoint of subjects’ (Fontana and Frey in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p. 659). However it is important to recognise the similarities and differences in the voices and the ‘multiplicity of our voices as experiences’ (Lillis, 2001, p. 46) as ‘voice as experience refers to the configurations of life experiences that any one individual student writer brings with her to higher education’ (Lillis, 2001, p. 46). Students in this context could be characterised as a subordinate group whose voice has not been heard and as a group who have less power than the academic staff that teach them. Subsequently, the ‘evaluator becomes the conduit for making such voices heard’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 26).

Feminist inspired interviews

As discussed above I wanted to use a framework which represented the student voice. I was drawn to the work of Ann Oakley's research which had adopted a feminist approach to interviewing women and Rubin & Rubin's (2005) concept of 'conversational partners'. Oakley (1981) highlighted that interviewing is a masculine paradigm which does not include characteristics, such as emotion and sensitivity. She was not inclined to continue interviewing women as 'objects' and not understanding them as individuals. Although this unwillingness arose from moral and ethical reasons, it is also significant methodologically. Interviewing has been widely used by feminist researchers and has often been regarded as the most appropriate method for 'producing the kind of knowledge that feminists wish to make available as being more in keeping with the politics of doing research as a feminist'(Maynard & Purvis, 1994, p. 11). Ann Oakley moved away from traditions in interviewing which were seen as ways of avoiding bias, for example not answering questions from interviewees or sharing experiences which would facilitate rapport building (Oakley, 2005, p. 226). As Oakley states (1981, p. 49) there is 'no intimacy without reciprocity', meaning that unless the interviewer shares their own identity and experiences with the interviewee, it is unlikely and unfair to expect them to share this information about themselves.

Although Oakley's research was in a different context (becoming mothers) her ideal of a non-hierarchical, non-exploitative interviewing process was something I wanted to emulate. This was in part because of my own ethical concerns about the hierarchical relationship advocated in positivist concepts of interviewing and through my view of the world recognising my own subjectivity. And additionally as previously mentioned from my background study findings I was conscious of the 'lecturer as expert' role and I did want to replicate this power imbalance experienced by students in my interviews with them. Moreover, this feminist approach to interviewing was grounded in the belief that it was 'an essential way of giving the subjective situation of women greater visibility' (Oakley, 2005, p. 226) or in the context of my research 'giving the subjective situation of students' experiences of engaging with feedback greater visibility'.

The use of interviews in this way does enable the development of a more democratised research process and of more reciprocal relationships between the researcher and the participants. The term 'conversational partner' (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 14) allows for the role of the interviewee shaping the topic and direction of the research themes, as it indicates the way in which the interviewer and interviewee work together to develop shared

understandings. The concept ‘conversational partner’ captured the non-exploitative, non-hierarchical relationship I wanted to create with the students who took part in my research. The term conversational partner also emphasizes the uniqueness of each person with whom you talk, his or her distinct knowledge, and the different ways in which he or she interacts with you (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 14). In the spirit of conversational partners I have include information about the ‘conversational partners’ whose interviews particularly influenced the research process (as shown on pages 57 – 64 of this chapter).

I was also influenced by use of a life-history interviewing approach by the work of feminist researcher Theresa Lillis. Lillis focused on the skills of essay writing and in the final stages of ‘talk back,’ the students’ experiences, and their experience of trying to make sense of the feedback that they received. Like Lillis (2001), my research on engagement with feedback is tied up with concepts of academic writing, widening participation and so-called, ‘non-traditional’ students. It seemed to me that the life-history approach often taken by feminists to explore the wider background of participants’ experiences might be appropriate as it would enable me to explore the wider social, cultural and historical factors influencing engagement with feedback within a widening participation context. Like Lillis (2001, p. 6) I have started from the premise that in order to understand the students’ experiences of feedback, it is important to have a sense of who the students are and their past experiences of education. Consequently, I am including profiles (Lillis, 2001, p. 4-8) drawn from the semi-structured interviews of 17 students. These are included as a way of introducing my research participants whose responses most strongly shaped the research analysis. Vignettes which provide information about characters are short pen pictures of people in a setting and enable the reader to understand what it is like to be that person in that scenario. Vignettes allow readers to identify with and briefly imagine we are that person and through this identification with the character we can understand their aspirations. Hughes (1998, p. 381) describes vignettes as ‘stories about individuals, situations and structures which can make reference to important points in the study of perceptions, beliefs and attitudes.’ The students who provided detailed information about themselves and their experiences of feedback enabled the creation of vignettes. This data is presented in no particular order, other than alphabetically by pseudonym.

Arvind

Arvind is a Asian British female in her late twenties. She had originally come to university after finishing her A Levels to study Business. However she had felt it was not for her and had left before the end of the first semester. Subsequently she had started working for the local council in an administrative/customer service role in the housing department. She had worked there full-time for six years, but she was *'bored'* and wanted a new challenge. Leaving her full-time job was a huge financial gamble as it was a *'good'* job, but she remained working in the same role part-time and they were flexible about her hours so that she could fit them around university. At the same time she was under pressure from her fiancé and his family. After a second interview with Arvind she talked about organising the wedding and having to go and live with her in-laws once she was married. She was reluctant to do this, but as she was only working part-time her partner and her would not be able to afford to buy a house. She was studying Psychology and Early Childhood and wanted to become an Educational Psychologist. Yet she knew that once she was married she would be under pressure from her own family and her husband's family to start a family, particularly as she was already in her late twenties. Consequently, she felt under enormous pressure to succeed at university to *'prove'* that going to university was worth it and therefore had very high expectations of the feedback that she received because she wanted to do as well as possible.

Byron

Byron is a young white male who had come to university after studying his A Levels. Initially he was quite pleased with the feedback on the DAW1300 module as it gave him opportunities to refine his work, although he was honest in saying that he did this because he wanted to get the best grade possible. However, he studied in America for the first semester of his second year and this changed his perception of the feedback he was receiving at Newcity university. In America he was in a small class of thirty students and he had to submit assignments every week and he received detailed feedback on these. For example, typically the feedback would be split into two sections, the first section would discuss what he had done well and the second section would be how he could improve his assignment further. Additionally, the tutor gave all the students his mobile telephone number and if they had any problems at all they were encouraged to ring him for a discussion. The support and opportunities for feedback on draft assignments meant that Byron was achieving high grades in America. Although culturally in America it is not unusual for students to receive high marks, such as 80 per cent on assignments (in comparison to a typical range of 40 per cent to

70 per cent in UK universities). He was then extremely disappointed when he returned to Newcity university and found a distinct lack of care and interest in his work in comparison and subsequently his grades also suffered. He felt it was too late to change to another university for his final year and became disillusioned and just focused on finishing his degree.

Claire

Claire is a young white female student who is local to the university area, but has moved out of her parental home to live with her boyfriend who works full-time. Her first year of AS levels at the local Further Education college was not successful, so she started her AS levels again studying a new range of subjects: Psychology, Communication Studies and English. She had made these choices based on her friends' enjoyment and success of these subjects. Subsequently, she found studying these subjects much better and enjoyed studying Psychology so much that she decided to study this at university. Claire found that the feedback was okay, her main concern had been about the extent of the jump from A Level to undergraduate study (perhaps because of the gap she had found from GCSE to A Level), she found that the feedback had been quite easy to use, such as making the sections of her report clear with headings, subsequently this reinforced to her that she had the capability of studying at undergraduate level.

Debbie

Debbie is a white mature female who had had negative educational experiences when she was younger and had never believed that university was for *'someone like her'*. However, as a mature student she had undertaken a creative writing class for pleasure and had been surprised when the tutor on this course suggested she take an Access course. Even after completing her Access course, she was still shocked at being accepted at university because she had never believed that she had the potential to do this. The difference in the level of support at university compared to when she was studying her Access course was a huge hurdle. Debbie had needed the support of her Access tutors because she was not confident about her capabilities and needed the boost to her self-esteem that her tutors provided. This was not the case at university and she found it difficult to continue with the limited support and feedback that was given to her at university.

Gillian

Gillian is a female, Black African, 30 year old student. She moved to Britain from Africa several years ago with her husband and two children. She had not had many educational opportunities in Africa due to having a young family. Gillian and her family were very happy living in the UK. She had studied a number of courses, such as ICT and GCSEs before embarking on an Access Course. Unfortunately, she was unable to fully complete the Access course, but managed to still obtain enough points to study at university. Although because of her points total she was not able to study her chosen subject, she was happy with the subject she could study because it had numerous career options related to health care. She was very concerned about receiving her feedback promptly because she wanted to ensure that her work would be of a good standard so that she would have a successful studying experience at university.

Helen

Helen is a young white female. As a young child she had been assigned to *'bottom sets'* and had not believed that she was academic, however she began to work harder and when she left school she was in the *'top-set'* and this was a *'huge achievement'*. She studied A Levels at a Further Education College, but this was beset with problems with tutors leaving and subsequently there was a variable quality in the support and feedback given. However, her academic struggle at school and the lack of support in further education had made her resilient and had helped her to develop an incremental attitude towards learning, saying also that if someone had told her she could not do something, she would do it to prove that she could. Helen strongly believed that by working hard she could achieve and this led to a strong determination to focus on learning. She had come to university to study Psychology and was pleased that she was given feedback on her assignments (in contrast to her Psychology A Level assignments) as she felt she now had a real opportunity to improve and develop. In particular, she wanted to develop her report writing skills as she felt they were an essential part of a Psychology career. Becoming a Psychology graduate and having a related career was important to her as she had not come from the *'most luxurious background'* and did not want to emulate her father's unemployment.

Henry

Henry is a white, mature male student with a middle class professional background. Leaving school at 15, Henry served in the armed forces for many years. After leaving the forces he went into management in a business environment. Having retired from business he decided to study a joint honours degree in History and Religious Studies at university. With no formal qualifications Henry found the transition from a work environment to that of university very difficult. The norms and rules that operate within the academic community were very different from what Henry had experienced at work. Older than many of the lecturers Henry was often frustrated by their apparent lack of professionalism and was concerned about the negative feedback given to younger students and the damage it had on their self-esteem. Henry found the expectations of academic assignments difficult and had to repeat his first year of university study.

John

John is a white male in his late twenties. He left school after finishing his A Levels as he was *'sick'* of studying. He got a full-time job in retail and after a few years left this job for another job in retail. However, he started to realise that he was dissatisfied with working in *'dead-end'* jobs and wanted a *'career'*. Having studied English at A level, he remembered how much he enjoyed writing and felt that a career in journalism was wanted he wanted to pursue. He applied to Newcity university (in his home town) to study English. Now he was at university he was really enjoying the experience and was keen to gain as much feedback on his writing as possible because this was what he felt he needed in order to embark on a successful journalism career.

Josie

Josie is a white female in her early twenties. She has had a difficult educational past finding it difficult to learn and feeling unsupported by her family. After leaving school she was unsure if she wanted to spend any more time in education. Eventually she decided to study a BTEC qualification in Travel and Tourism and overall this was a positive experience. This started to lead her to consider the possibility of going to university. She did not have enough *'points'* to study for a degree, but undeterred she applied for a HND course called 'Criminal Justice' and was accepted by Newcity university. Once she was *'in'* at university she asked if she could change to the Law degree course. She was allowed to do this and started getting good grades on her essays, although her doubts about her capabilities from her time at school never really left her.

Katya

Katya is an Eastern European (originally from Hungary) female in her late twenties and has lived in the UK for three years. She wanted to study at the University of Newcity because of the diverse cultural background of its students as this had suggested to her it would also be a friendly place to study. Prior to attending university she had done a home study course in Business Management. Katya had decided to study Psychology because she felt she had a curious nature and often asked questions, she hoped to study for a PhD after completing her degree. However when receiving the feedback on her first assignment, this had been a huge shock and disappointment to her. Nevertheless she rallied and decided to use this as a learning experience to improve her subsequent university assignments.

Lily

Lily is an eighteen year old white female and has started at university directly after finishing her A Levels at college. She lives in halls of residence, but her parents only live twenty miles away which has enabled her to be independent whilst also not getting homesick. Her main interests are music and going to gigs with friends. The large lecture theatre for the module DAW1300 made her feel anonymous and she struggled with the open-ended nature of submitting the portfolio tasks for feedback. Lily's friends all submitted their assignments for feedback and found it a helpful process and had done well on the module. Lily did not submit the portfolio at the end of the module, although she had done some of the assignments. In hindsight she said that she regretted the non-submission and had organised re-sitting the module when it ran again in semester two of her first year.

Peter

Peter is a male, Polish student in his early twenties and is attending the University of Newcity for a year on an exchange programme. He was concerned about passing the English proficiency test and was relieved when he did so. The concept of feedback is a new experience for Peter as he was only familiar with a grade, or ticks and crosses, although occasionally a teacher may write 'good' on his assignments. Peter recognised that the concept of feedback was for him to improve his assignments, but he found putting this into practice very difficult. Nevertheless as a Film Studies student he often gave and received informal peer feedback in online forums with his peers and found this helpful.

Scott

Scott is a young white male who was incredibly proud of being the first person in his family to attend university. He had just missed out on the grades for his first choice of university, but was really happy studying at Newcity university. However, this pride of being accepted to study at university, was tempered by a lack of self-belief in his capabilities. This was reflected in the self-blame he attached to himself when he could not understand the assignment feedback, believing it was his lack of academic capability that was the problem not the quality/language of the feedback. Having really enjoyed his A Levels in Psychology and Sociology he was studying them as a joint honours degree and planned to teach both these subjects to A Level students after finishing his degree.

Shazeen

Shazeen is a 22 year old British Asian Indian female. She comes from a background familiar with long-term unemployment. She has traditional A Level qualifications, but studied for these against a backdrop of bringing up a baby and a subsequent pregnancy during her A Level study. She started her A Levels five weeks after her son was born and then at the end of her first year she found out she was pregnant again. She met with a lot of resistance from her family who did not want her to carry on with her A Levels. However, she ignored this pressure and finished her last exam three days before her due date. Now at university she studied in the evenings after she had prepared a family meal, finished her housework and put her children to bed. She was keen to make the most of feedback opportunities to develop her learning, as a good degree classification would help support her and her family's future, through the employment opportunities she believed would be available to her as a graduate.

Shireen

Shireen is a young black female. She had studied GNVQ Social Care and A Level Sociology at college. She had spent three years at college and coming to university was the natural progression, she was studying for a degree in Social Care so this linked well with her previous learning. She had decided to stay at home because it would be *'a pain'* to move out, the journey to university took her about 45 minutes on the bus. She felt that university study was much more independent than at college and believed that it was not possible to ask for feedback on drafts of work. Shireen did however ask the lecturer a lot of questions about her assignments to ensure that she was on the *'right lines'*. However, at the end of the module she

did not collect her feedback and this may have been linked to 'survival' through protecting her self-esteem by not reading negative comments.

Stefan

Stefan is a mature student with British and European heritage. He works part-time and studies on a part-time basis. Stefan enjoys studying for the pleasure of learning and had previously completed a degree at Newcity University. His current degree is in Creative Writing and Philosophy. He values feedback, particularly as a creative writer. As well as having the confidence as a mature student to ask for verbal feedback from tutors, he has never perceived them to be unapproachable, for example office hours have often clashed with a lecture he is attending for another module. In this instance having emailed a lecturer explaining the situation they have then rearranged an alternative time. He feels that his confidence in going to see lecturers may be because he is an older student and has *'lived'* a little. Additionally as a creative writing student, he set up his own informal network with other students who then gave each other feedback on their writing. Overall, he values feedback and has a clear idea of what he feels to be good and bad feedback because of his prior experience as a student.

Zahara

Zahara is a mature female student with Asian and British heritage. Zahara had studied Town Planning at university twenty years ago and had had a career in this. Now she was the mother of Primary and Secondary school aged children and was studying at university for '*herself*'. Zahara was studying Creative Writing and did not intend to embark on a new career, such as journalism, but instead felt that maybe she would do something for herself such as write novels. She had been frustrated at how ill-prepared she was for starting her degree as she had her placed confirmed on a Wednesday and had started university the following Monday and felt that this had not given her the opportunity to do enough background reading or preparation. Feedback was a novelty for Zahara because she felt universities had moved on from when she had studied Town Planning, for example saying that she only ever got a grade and you did not expect the tutor to discuss your exam/assignment grades, unless you had failed. Therefore getting feedback was a novelty, but at the same time she could see how it was important to help her develop her writing and felt that being as she had not studied for twenty years it was of great importance.

Trustworthiness, dependability and validity

This is not say that these stories or vignettes are 'true', equally I am not suggesting that a participant would deliberate mislead a researcher. Rather, the stories we all tell to make sense of our lives may focus on particular aspects or points which means that the stories are not completely representative of events. Yet, the researcher's analysis needs to be credible and this means enough of the data needs to be present in order for the reader to be satisfied with the trustworthiness of the analysis being made. Although the researcher needs to be aware that we often carry more than one version of our past and the one we select to tell will be influenced by who is listening and why they are listening. This does not mean collecting stories is a fruitless exercise, but instead requires the inquirer to be reflexive in understanding the context of the story telling, the potential power relations and agenda at play. Lincoln and Guba's (1985) notion of 'transferability' is a useful technique to support the trustworthiness of the data. They suggest that a rich enough depiction of the data is presented so that the reader can make comparisons in another setting. I have included references to the findings of other studies in similar settings (e.g. Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003) to indicate the transferability of my data in my own findings chapters.

Dependability

Dependability, is a more appropriate term, than reliability in a qualitative study like mine (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300). Lincoln and Guba suggest that in order to assess the dependability of a study, the researcher should consider the question 'How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences that the research findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to?' (1985, p. 290). Dependability requires the researcher to take into account any issues of instability, as well as research design induced changes. An audit trail is perhaps one of the best ways to indicate dependability, such as providing the reader with copies of questionnaire designs and interview transcripts. I have included copies of this information in my appendices, so the reader can 'audit' the dependability of my research. Additionally, there are several other ways in which dependability can be assessed. Diachronic reliability is the stability of an observation over time. My research data was collected over a period of eighteen months to ensure the findings were consistent over a period of time. Synachronic reliability is the similarity of observations within the same time period, for example through the triangulation of research methods. As discussed in the research design chapter I used a range of research methods which all pointed to the same findings. I also used member-

checking to ensure the accuracy of interview transcripts and actively involved participants in assessing whether my interpretation of the data accurately represented them.

Validity

The notion of validity, literally meaning truth, identifies how true an account represents participants' realities of social phenomena (Cresswell & Miller, 2000, p.124). However, validity is a complex idea within interpretivist methodologies. For example how best to accurately represent the voice of the participants, is a particular topic of debate among feminist researchers. Ramazanoglu (2000, p. 135) argues that the idea it is even possible to achieve valid knowledge is too simplistic. Feminist researchers find issues of validity problematic because they are trying to reconcile two apparently mutually exclusive positions. First, that all knowledge is relative to the context in which it is situated and second, that there can be no 'truth' because a participant's social reality is socially produced knowledge. So whilst feminist researchers believe that no one participant's account can represent reality as other people see it, they nevertheless believe they have a duty to provide 'truthful' representations of the participants so that their voice can be heard.

Therefore feminists have developed a range of strategies to promote the validity of findings, such as reflexivity. Lather (1993) uses the term 'construct validity', to indicate reflexivity. This approach suggests that the researcher should consistently explain all the steps taken in the research process and how she has influenced the process of the research. I also agree I need to explain my own personal beliefs and biases to ensure the validity of my work (Cresswell & Miller, 2000, p. 127) and I have done this in the researcher beliefs section of this chapter. My reflexivity in this study has been an ongoing process as I have become increasingly conscious of my own identity and biases and the impact that this could have on the research. Additionally, the research design chapter discusses in detail the issues I have considered in the research in order to promote reflexivity and increase the validity of my findings, whilst I have been interviewing, transcribing and analysing the data. Oakley (in Roberts, 1981, p. 31) comments that 'very few sociologists who employ interview data actually bother to describe in detail the process of interviewing itself'. I have attempted to rectify this in my own research (please see page 74 in my research design chapter). Adapted from Oakley (2005, p. 226) I comment on: 'The social/ personal characteristics of myself as interviewer, the quality of the interviewer-interviewee interaction, hospitality offered, attempts by interviewees to use interviewers as sources of information, and the extension of

interviewer-interviewee encounters into more broadly based social relationships.' In doing this the reader can judge the research in light of my position.

'The purpose of a theoretical framework, however, is not to provide comfortable clothing for data...a theoretical framework offers a vehicle to make generalizations to other contexts and provide an explanation for why people do and say what they do and say' (Anafara & Mertz, 2006, p. 70). (An overview of my framework for analysis of the interviews and reflective writing can be found in Appendix 4 and 5). Subsequently, *my methodology is inspired by a feminist approach to research* and focuses on interviews underpinned by feminist principles, drawing heavily on the work of Ann Oakley (1981; 2005). Feminist principles of research are 'highly diverse' (Olseson in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.234) in terms of emphasis (for example, postmodern; Felski, 2000), Black Feminist methodology; James & Denean Sharpley-Whiting, 2000, Marxist Feminism; Tong, 2007). Instead, my methodology is inspired by a feminist approach and shaped by the issues that I think are important to all students who are ultimately judged by those in authority: voice and power and the researcher/ researched relationship. This is a perfectly legitimate use of feminist principles as it is acknowledged that it is appropriate to borrow and focus on the issues that are most relevant (Ramazanoglu, 2000) and not stick rigidly to a specific style of feminist research. Many feminist researchers (e.g. Morley & Walsh, 1996) argue that there is not a specific research method which is feminist, but the underlying approach to using that research method may be feminist. Likewise, as Cook & Fonow (1986) state the feminist approach may be about the research techniques and strategies 'feminist assumptions into the techniques and strategies used to gather and analyze data' (p.4). The way in which I gathered the reflective writing documents reflected my commitment to this, 'using documents can be a relatively unobtrusive form of research, (Blaxter *et al*., 2001, p. 168). The use of these documents did not require participants to be subjected to the more invasive process of an interview, whilst still giving them an opportunity to have their voice heard. Equally, the use of questionnaires allowed respondents an opportunity to inform the research process anonymously as I acknowledged the appropriateness of strategies which considered issues of voice and power between the researcher and researched. The student voice is significant, but under represented in the research on student engagement with feedback. I feel that any methodology that explores the experiences of students' within this context, should seek to expose the wider power issues and give students a voice. Therefore I use an interpretivist methodology

inspired by certain feminist principles: allowing those traditionally without a voice to be heard and acknowledging power differentials.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has indicated how the methodology for this research project has evolved. The methodology has changed from technical action research to adhering to principles of a feminist approach to interviewing, with a particular emphasis on voice and power. The change in methodology has been a result of issues emerging within the research process, such as a mismatch in practitioner-researcher expectations. However, it has developed into a methodology which resonates strongly with my own beliefs as a researcher. Additionally my use of a feminist inspired approach will allow me to explore the pertinent issues that emerged from my background study, such as the power issues surrounding engaging with feedback. Furthermore this stance is unusual within feedback research and may give me the opportunity to understand students' experiences of feedback from an alternative viewpoint. Chapter 5 – research design discusses how the principles of a feminist approach have been applied through my choice of research methods.

Chapter 5: Research design

In the methodology chapter I outlined my feminist approach to research. In this research design chapter I focus on the instruments I developed for the main study and how my methodological stance influenced my use of them. This chapter is divided into six sections. In the first section I explain the purpose of the study. In the following three sections I then discuss the three qualitative research instruments I used in this study: semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and reflective writing. I discuss the general characteristics of each instrument, how I used each method in my research and the advantages and disadvantages this afforded me. In the fifth section I explain the processes used to analyse my data and revisit issues of validity and dependability. In the final section I recount the ethical issues I faced in gathering the data and how I responded to these dilemmas.

Purpose of study

My research examines first year undergraduates' understandings of their experiences of feedback, the meanings they attach to feedback and their behaviour towards it.

'Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

There are a wide range of choices available to qualitative researchers in terms of research design, yet whichever research design is chosen, it needs to elicit the key elements associated with qualitative research, for example the focus of my research is on cultural norms in students' responses to feedback, ways of understanding feedback and the meanings that students attach to the phenomena of engaging with feedback. Like other qualitative researchers I am not claiming that my research design will allow for generalisable findings, rather I hope that aspects of the narrative or 'story' (Tesch, 1990, p. 2) that emerges will

resonate with others. I believed the use of semi-structured interviews, questionnaires and reflective writing was the most appropriate research design to understand students' perspectives on their experiences of feedback. Denzin & Lincoln (2005, pp 3-4) state 'qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study; persona; experiences; introspection; artifacts; cultural texts and productions; observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts – that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individual lives'. To recap, these are the research questions I intended to answer through the use of the research instruments being discussed in this chapter:

1. What is the student perspective on feedback?
1a. What meanings and purposes do students' attach to feedback?
1b. What do students think is 'good' feedback?

2. What does *engaging* with feedback mean to students?
2a. How do students characterise 'good' *engagement* with feedback?

3. What are the factors that promote/prevent engagement with feedback?
3a. What are the implications of this for students and teachers, policy and practice across the university sector?

Selecting participants

Newcity university is a widening participation university, that is drawing students from sectors of society that have traditionally been under-represented in higher education, such as mature students, minority ethnic students and those from disadvantaged socio-economic groups. Therefore, I felt it was important that my research participants reflected to some extent the diversity within the university. Of the 24 students I interviewed for the main study, ten were from a minority ethnic group and eight were 21 years old or over when entering the university. 20 out of the 24 students were the first person in their family to go to university and some of these students described the difficult socio-economic circumstances faced by their families, such as unemployment. My research participants were from two first year undergraduate modules because this piece of research was funded by a Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) focusing on the first year student experience (see the introduction chapter for more information).

The first module was DAW1300 Developing Academic Writing, a study skills module for Social Science and Humanities students. They received formative feedback on drafts of work, finally producing a portfolio that was assessed summatively. Submitting drafts of work on this module was optional and students did not need to demonstrate how they had engaged with any feedback that they received. The second module was Psychology Report Writing PRW1760, a Psychology module focusing on writing reports. The students studying PRW1760 were required to document how they had used the formative feedback from their first report to improve their second report. PRW1760 was different from DAW1300 in that engagement with the feedback was compulsory, rather than voluntary and I wanted to see if this difference in 'culture' had any impact on students' experiences of engaging with the feedback. Through the use of modules in different disciplines I hoped to see if their different pedagogical underpinnings influenced student engagement with feedback.

I had direct access to participants through the module DAW1300 because this was the module my background study was based on and the module leader had already agreed access. I approached students individually and explained my research and asked if they would like to be interviewed. Very few students refused my direct approach, however in about half of cases students did not arrive to be interviewed. Sometimes they had genuinely forgotten, but in some cases they did not respond to my subsequent emails and I concluded that they had changed their mind about being interviewed. I gave free memory sticks to the DAW1300 students who were interviewed. My approach with PRW1760 was different. One of my PhD supervisors knew the module leader for PRW1760 and acted as a 'gatekeeper' in allowing me access. I used the module PRW1760 email tool to explain my research and outline the participant hours students could gain if they participated in my research. Psychology students at Newcity University are required to participate in the studies of other students/researchers during their first and second year if they wish to carry out their own research project in their final year. To summarise then, these modules were chosen because they fulfilled the criteria of being first year modules, providing students with formative feedback and I had been given access to them by the module leaders. My interviewee sample was based solely on those students willing to be interviewed from these two first year modules. Overall the process of finding willing participants was complex and challenging. Therefore I appreciated the time students gave up to participate in semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are the main research tool I used and I will discuss this in much greater detail in the next section.

Semi-structured interviews

I believed that semi-structured interviews would help to answer all my research questions, but I wanted to also use reflective writing and open questionnaire responses to triangulate the interview data. From a qualitative stance interviews are generally face-to-face, one-to-one discussions with an overview of questions or topics that the interviewer wishes to ask. A semi-structured approach to interviewing allows greater flexibility so that the specific points raised by each participant can be pursued in more detail. Feminist researchers, share many of the same interviewing principles as other qualitative researchers, for example they are 'primarily concerned with obtaining full and sincere responses, the need for rapport and genuine interaction between interviewer and interviewee as subjective beings' (O'Connell Davidson & Layder, 1994, p. 60). Developing a good rapport with my interview participants was important so that my interview data was a personal and sensitive reflection of the student experience. Furthermore feminist researchers such as Oakley (1981 in Roberts, 1981) argue that it is important to avoid creating a hierarchical relationship between the interviewer and interviewee**.** This can be achieved by adopting a less structured approach which encourages the participant to have more control over the focus of discussion and can also be likened to Rubin & Rubin's (2005) concept of 'conversational partners'.

Timing of the interviews

I carried out interviewing in a series of stages. I conducted ten interviews in the background study (see background study chapter). In the main study I conducted 24 interviews (this included re-interviewing some of the background study participants). I interviewed some students twice – students that had participated in the background study and then the main study or students who had participated in the main study and then the validity interviews. These students expressed an interest in my research and asked if I would like to interview them again and this allowed me to build rapport and develop validity in the findings through, for example the level of consistency in responses in subsequent interviews. There is no 'formula' for how many interviews should be conducted in a piece of qualitative research. Therefore my decision to conduct 24 interviews was based on time-management and 'saturation' of the themes. I had time to conduct 24 interviews and transcribe the interview data, additionally at this stage I felt that the themes emerging from the data were saturated, that is no new themes were emerging. Therefore I felt confident that additional interviews

would not add to my research findings. Newcity university operates a two semester structure. I interviewed students at the end of January/early February after they had received feedback from their semester one modules. I also interviewed students at the end of May after they had received their semester two feedback. All interviews were digitally recorded with the participant's permission. I transcribed each interview myself with the Olympus Digital Recorder Software. Interview times varied between 30 minutes and 1 hour. This in part was down to my experience and confidence as an interviewer and the later interviews were much longer and more detailed. As I became more confident I was able to ask more follow-up questions and think of ways to re-phrase queries if I needed further clarification. In addition, as I started to think about the emerging themes I was able to follow-up points which I felt may be pertinent to my analysis.

Interview schedule

I structured the interview schedule into four different sections. Firstly I asked background questions, such as 'What experience did you have of feedback before starting university?' My background questions were brought about by my commitment to a feminist approach to research, as feminists try to understand the wider influences on a participant's experiences. So by asking participants about their previous education it helped me to understand the views they had formed of themselves as learners, how their lives outside of university impacted on their life at university and the cultural environment they experienced outside of university, for example the level of encouragement and support (if any) they had from their families to attend university. I was interested in what experiences participants' had had of feedback before coming to university because I wanted to see if there were any patterns between their previous experience of feedback and their attitudes towards feedback at university.

The second section of the interview schedule concentrated on feedback in the specific module that I had recruited them from, either DAW1300 or PRW1760, such as had they received feedback, what their views on their feedback were and if and how they had engaged with the feedback. The third section of the schedule then asked students about their feedback experiences in other modules to compare their feedback experience overall. These questions were very important and were an attempt to answer the main research questions of my research. Then in the final section they discussed how they felt feedback would contribute to their learning at university overall. I was curious about the value students placed on feedback, in terms of its potential impact for them throughout their degree and the extent to which this

influenced them engaging with the feedback. I probed the students' responses by asking them to provide examples.

How effective were the interviews?

The effectiveness of the interview process varied. Some of my participants' gave detailed and frank descriptions of their experiences and certainly provided the 'thick description' which I was hoping for and these responses came with very little prompting from myself. Other participants were less vocal and answered questions with little detail and my prompts did not always elicit a great deal more explanation. I believe that this was partly because of my interviewing experience (as discussed above), some students had not really considered their experiences of feedback, whilst for others the digital recording of the interview was distracting. Although all of the participants agreed for the interviews to be recorded, I think the power of recording equipment is often not recognised in an interview situation. For example, I found that some of the conversations I had with students when the recording equipment was off were much more illuminating and forthcoming than when the digital recorder was on. I think the recording equipment may have made students feel uncomfortable and self-conscious and they were reluctant to talk in the same frank and open manner when it was turned on. In another instance as soon as I turned off the recording equipment a student started telling me about her personal problems and I think her pre-occupation with these had influenced her interview responses. After the interviews I made notes of anything the students had said that was not recorded to support the interview data and the interview context.

I have used the vignette technique to allow for the situational context to be explored in the interview process. Miles & Huberman (1994, p. 81) describe this as 'a day in the life'. In describing the interview process I am providing a focused description of a series of events taken to be representative and typical of the interview situation. Erickson (in Wittrock, 1986, pp. 149 – 150) supports this idea suggesting that it is a 'vivid portrayal of the conduct of an event of everyday life, in which the sights and sounds of what was being said and done are described in the natural sequence of their occurrence in real time.' Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest ways in which the structure of this 'typical' scenario can be formulated into the narrative. For example, providing the context, who was involved, what you did, what happened as a result, what the impact was, why this happened. The situational vignette can also discuss your hopes, expectations for the future, predictions and reflection on what was

learned. I tried to describe the situation as realistically as possible by adopting some of these principles in my interview vignettes by focusing on the context, who was involved, my reactions to the situations I was in and my hopes and reflections on the situational context.

Interview vignettes

I believed the ideal room for interviewing should be quiet and private; the main room I used for my interviews was both of these and comfortable! Many of my interviews took place in a pseudo sitting-room (used by the university mentoring team) complete with sofas and a coffee-table (and luckily a plug close enough to connect the digital recorder). I was able to book this room in advance with relative ease. This provided a peaceful and informal setting in which to conduct the interviews and I'm sure that this ambience helped to contribute to the depth of emotion portrayed in some of the interview data.

However, I anticipated that the room location would be difficult to access for students (a card swipe required for corridor access and not close to areas of the building typically associated with teaching and learning). Consequently, I arranged to meet interview participants in a more familiar and central point – the university cafe′. This also gave me the opportunity to buy students a drink etc before starting the interview. But also led to me approaching random strangers asking if they were waiting to be interviewed (the Psychology participants in particular as they had been contacted by email) and in one instance I was sitting opposite someone for a good five minutes before finding out they were my interviewee. The distance from the cafe′ to the interview room was at times embarrassing, in particular one participating student informing me en-route of the knee operation she was due to have after we had reached the top of a substantial staircase. This did make me consider mobility issues and how to broach this as often I had not met the students prior to the interviews. I decided in future I would just ask the students if they preferred to use the stairs or the lift.

The good thing about 'the walk' was it gave me an opportunity get to know the students better and to explain my research in more detail. A lot of rich information was generated about the student's life and their experiences in relation to feedback on 'the walk', but sometimes the digital recorder put an end to such vivid descriptions (as discussed on page 74 of this chapter).

At other times I was unable to create such a welcoming and relaxing interview scenario, for example when a participant agreed to an impromptu interview, such as *'I'm here now, see you in 5 minutes...'* (this of course may have been linked to the student's situation of only being 'on campus' at certain times and days, such as when they were attending for lectures/ seminars). In this situation it was not possible to book a room (as this generally had to be done in advance through central administration requests). I became attuned to finding 'quiet spaces' for these last minute interviews. One of the 'quiet spaces' I found was the staff room adjoined to the university cafe′ and this had the advantage of being quiet enough to aide a more straightforward transcription of the data. However, I was often concerned about being questioned over the 'legitimacy' of being here myself as well as that of the student I was interviewing. On one memorable occasion the 'extremist talk' of the participant (although valuable to my research) had me squirming. I was concerned that the staff in the staffroom could hear our interview and so being asked (in what I perceived to be a loud voice) if I thought there was any value in making an official complaint about the poor feedback a student had received from a particular lecturer made me very uncomfortable.

However, the 'legitimacy' I had in booking a room (when the mentoring room was unavailable) did sometimes cause me problems. I had been given the extension number of the member of staff who booked rooms for Psychology research students conducting their research. I booked a room without question, but then made the faux-pas of querying where the room was when I collected the key. The fact that I was not a Psychology student, but merely interviewing them did not impress the 'room-booker'. I pretended I could not remember who had told me this would be okay and realised I had unwittingly extinguished an easy way of booking rooms for my interviews. I then reverted back to asking departmental administrators to book rooms centrally as their authority in doing this was not questioned. As a research student I did not have much 'authority' within the institutional setting, although I acknowledged that as the researcher I was in a more powerful position when writing up the research.

That is not to say the students interviewed did not have any power within the interview process. As the power shifted to the students during the interview process when they were able to discuss the feedback issues that were most pertinent to them, for example the students wanted someone to know about the tutors from whom they had received poor feedback. In these situations I was the facilitator for these experiences and emotions. In many ways the

participants were pleased that I was undertaking this research because they felt that there were problems with feedback that needed addressing and they wished me luck with my research. Fine & Weiss (in Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.115) highlights that it is possible that participants recognise and exploit power inequalities within the research process. 'They recognised that we could take their stories, their concerns and their worries to audiences, policy makers and the public in ways that they themselves could not because they would not be listened to.' I feel that this resonates with the participants in my research, as individual students it is likely to be much harder to justify issues around feedback and may feel that it will be viewed as their problem, for example their lack of understanding or motivation However, as a collective voice, the findings are much harder to disregard. I explained honestly to the students that in effect the university had commissioned the research project and that they acknowledged that feedback was an issue. I told the participants that I had been encouraged to have a 'recommendations' chapter and that I genuinely hoped the research would impact on feedback practises, although there was no way for me to specify how or guarantee that this would happen.

The researcher writing up the research findings has implications for the 'voice' of the participants that the research claims to represent. This was clearly an issue within my own research as I wanted to represent the student voice, but felt through my analysis their voice would be obscured by my own interpretations. I still cannot claim that I am faithfully representing the voice of the participants and this tension between my methodological aims and the practical reality of my research strategy will always remain. However, in a small way I have attempted to address the voice of the students through my research design. After analysing my data I presented my findings to five students who had previously been interviewed to validate my findings. The themes in the validity interviews were:

1. Discuss the examples of feedback ("good" and "bad") you have brought with you
2. Read through my examples of feedback and discuss
3. Thinking back to the factors you have discussed and the reasons you engage (or not) with feedback draw a mindmap explaining these factors and issues
4. Explain your mindmap
5. I will explain my model

6. Give your comments about my model – how close is it to your experiences? What would you change and why?

Although I wanted to make my research participatory as much as possible, such as asking participants to comment on my analysis, this was only possible in a limited way, partly because I did not have enough time to speak to each participant again and secondly students were often too busy to discuss it further. Using questionnaires was one approach I felt would enable me to access a wider range of students. The next section discusses questionnaires in more detail.

Questionnaires

There were several advantages in me collecting questionnaire data, such as collecting data from a larger number of respondents than I could interview, providing descriptive statistics, and including open-ended questions to allow respondents to comment in their own words. At first sight the use of a questionnaire within research based on a feminist research approach may well seem contradictory. Traditionally feminists have viewed questionnaires as a quantitative tool and feminists have often associated quantitative methods with misrepresenting and exploiting participants. However, I have adopted a more current stance within feminist research which is about the appropriateness of the methods for the research questions (Letherby, 2004). My use of a questionnaire tool is supported by the argument of Kelly *et al.*, (1994) who argues that firstly participants' may not wish to share their experiences through an interview and secondly questionnaires allow participants to respond to both closed questions and open-ended questions anonymously.

I was aware my questionnaires could have several drawbacks, for example participants may suffer from 'questionnaire fatigue' if there were too many questions, therefore it was important to be realistic about the time and effort required to fill in a questionnaire. I used 12 questions only (with a mixture of multiple choice, open-ended and demographic data), which were presented on two pieces of double-sided A4, with an anticipated completion time of no longer than 10 minutes (easily completed during a session break in a lecture). Pre-testing questionnaires because of the potential for the misinterpretation or misunderstanding of questionnaires is important. To minimise these potential problems I asked 4 students to complete the questionnaire so I could evaluate the appropriateness and suitability of my

questionnaire design before using it in the main study. The questionnaire in my research was designed partially through other surveys on feedback, such as Maclellan (2001) and Lui and Carless (2006).

The questionnaire was completed by three groups of students. Two groups were from the module DAW1300 and the third group were from PRW1760. The attendance numbers on the module DAW1300 varied between 25 – 45 and therefore to gain any statistically relevant data the questionnaire needed to be submitted to two different cohorts of students on the same module. The response rate at each point of submission varied between 85 per cent and 100 per cent. (I am not claiming any statistical validity in my research design and only provide this information as an indicator of the context in which these questionnaires were administered and collected). Students from PRW1760 were awarded time towards their participant hours for completing the questionnaire and 20 students from this module completed the questionnaire. Overall I had 83 questionnaire responses.

I entered the questionnaire data into the computer software package 'Surveyor'. This allowed for an overview of descriptive statistics by gender, ethnicity, age and social class. This was important as I wanted to identify if there were any possible trends between any of these demographics and the students' experiences and perceptions of feedback. Therefore the use of Surveyor gave a broader picture of the cohorts of first year students on the modules DAW1300 and PRW1760 at the University of Newcity. It was not appropriate for students to complete the questionnaire electronically because of university regulations preventing undergraduates the use of the Surveyor tool package. I felt that one person (myself) entering the data onto Surveyor would help minimise the number of errors, rather than having a number of people do this. Although I am not claiming my entry of the questionnaire data was error free I am hoping that I have minimised the risk and level of human error creeping in and skewing the data by having one person only entering the data (Anderson & Arsenault, 1998, p.168). One of the main disadvantages of questionnaires is the lack of depth and detail that they can provide, I accounted for this by including open – ended questionnaire responses and complementing the questionnaire data with the semi-structured interviews and reflective writing.

Reflective writing documents

First year undergraduates were asked as part of their portfolio for Module DAW1300 to reflect on their experiences of feedback and if it had any perceived value or benefits to them after watching a video about students discussing feedback. The module DAW1300 focused not only the processes of academic writing but also tried to familiarise students with the processes of feedback and the benefits it can have for them when developing their work. One way in which students were asked to reflect on their experiences and beliefs about feedback was to watch a video about students at another university receiving feedback. Students gave me permission to see copies of this work which meant that I was able to analyse these documents. I analysed 50 pieces of reflective writing. The use of reflective writing in my data collection was serendipitous, in that it was produced for another purpose, however I could see that it had the potential to be a useful source of data. I asked students permission to see copies of their reflective writing and anonymised all pieces of writing. I did not want to use this data to 'check' students' interview responses, but rather to see if it confirmed and supported my analysis of the interview data.

When considering documents for analysis it is important to consider the original purpose and intended reader of a document and any potential biases that may result from this. However, an advantage of texts is that they have not been influenced by researcher bias and therefore as long as they are genuine, issues of reliability tend only to arise when developing categorises for analysis. Although content analysis (Denscombe,1998, p.271) is often used when analysing documentary evidence I decided to use a thematic analysis only as I felt that that was the most authentic way of analysing the data. Content analysis can have quantitative and positivist overtones and may result in the meanings behind the data being lost or misrepresented, therefore I felt the use of content analysis was incompatible with my use of a feminist research approach. Contrary to beliefs about the use of mixed methods to 'check' and validate the voices' of participants' this was not the reason I used documents in my research. I wanted data which would be illuminating in understanding students' perceptions and experiences of feedback. This stance is supported by Kelly *et al.*, (1994) and Oakley (1998, p. 724) who argue that 'the critical question remains the appropriateness of the method to the research question.'

Data analysis

As Miles & Huberman (1994, p.9) recommend my focus was to identify 'patterns and processes, commonalities and differences.' Glaser's (1978, 1992) and Strauss and Corbin's work on grounded theory (1990, 1998) contains positivist assumptions, such as a belief in a 'neutral' researcher. This clearly contradicts the feminist approach to research I am undertaking and my beliefs in subjectivity and reflexivity. Therefore, initially the use of grounded theory in my research design may seem at odds with the lens through which I interpret society. However, in a similar way to using the principles of feminist research which are appropriate to my research questions, I am also using the elements of grounded theory that are appropriate for my analysis. Strauss and Corbin's (1998, p.101) 'position moves into post-positivism because they also propose giving voice to their respondents', representing them as accurately as possible, discovering and acknowledging how respondents' views of reality conflict with their own'. Strauss and Corbin's focus on voice is very relevant to my own feminist research aims of giving a voice to my respondents. Charmaz (in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p.510), argues we can adopt grounded theory strategies without embracing its earlier positivist leanings.

I did not strictly adhere to the principles of grounded theory. However I felt that the process for coding and developing themes was helpful and used some of these principles. Initially, I read the transcripts for concepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 103). Points of significance were noted during the reading and re-reading of interview transcripts. Strauss (1987) suggests coding for conditions, interactions among actors, strategies and tactics and consequence. Phrases that are used repeatedly by participants are also significant. Strauss and Corbin (1998), usefully provide examples of transcripts and examples of how they have analysed their data. I think this is a very helpful way of explaining their analysis and I am going to replicate this process to show how I have analysed my data. The examples below indicate how I started to use this strategy to code my data initially.

Conditions – Limited and ambiguous feedback (see page 117 Findings chapter 7)
It's the same with the other one – "however try and keep this a little bit more focused." "Good start on a critical analysis" - how could I go a bit more further in that? I mean you can probably see from that you can't get much from feedback like this. (Arvind, interview)

Interactions among actors – Unapproachable staff (see page 117 Findings chapter 7)

**Subject is a problem, you're just given your assignment and then don't get any help. It's like they are too important and won't touch us. They think they are better than us.* (Debbie, interview)

Strategies and tactics – Personalized support (see page 117 Findings chapter 7)
Yeah like the last one there was like I really just didn't understand the feedback and I went and had a word with the demonstrators and I didn't find that useful either hence that is why I said to yourself I was just going to pay the money and have private tuition, which as I have said worked. It was a bit of a shock because my grades just went from E to B. (Arvind, interview)

Consequences – Damage to self-esteem (see page 117 Findings chapter 7)
Yeah definitely when I first had mine I was you know I was like am I on the right track, do I want to do this? Am I going to get anywhere? So you know from that point its left me with I will not approach that demonstrator I just will not go anywhere near her I go to talk to the other person. (Arvind, interview)

I was keen to highlight the words and phrases that were used repeatedly by participants and to understand the meanings of these. I also followed Strauss and Corbin's (1998, p. 106) advice about ensuring the conceptual names were appropriate to the context in which they were located. So, for example from this extract of Henry's transcript a theme emerged around the concept of 'Being wrong'.

If it says this is absolute rubbish again it is not very constructive because in my mind you think you have done what is necessary but it hasn't worked. (Henry, interview)

Through this coding process I was able to consider the interconnections that recurred between the emerging units and categories (Denscombe,1998, p.272). As well as internalising the themes and codes I had developed I also made memos on the transcripts, that is a record of my thoughts and questions about the emerging concepts (Strauss & Corbin 1998, p. 109). Qualitative data analysis is aided when you can reflect on your data, mark it up, write memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 312), based on this as I coded the data I thought it might useful to make memos. Memos are notes about any thoughts, ideas or questions that you feel are

emerging from the concepts in the data. Glaser (1992, p. 82) explains the memoing process as 'the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst'. The value of memos is that they are a way of recording new thoughts and enable the researcher to consider different ideas within the data analysis. The content of memos is not limited and could include a wide range of comments, such as hunches and insights. Therefore through revisiting my data with memos I was able to consider the interconnections that recurred between the emerging units and categories (Denscombe,1998, p.272). Below are examples of data extracts and the corresponding memos I made:

Interview data extracts	**Memos**
I think it helps if, if it wasn't compulsory I think some people might think that they won't do it which is fair enough but you know I've always been if I've been **criticised** or something I like to sort it you know but erm cos like if I get **criticisms** I think like err, but then I look at it the next day and think like maybe they were right you know, nobody likes being told that they're **wrong** but I think you've got to do it you know, but I think if it wasn't **compulsory** you know I think a lot of people wouldn't do it but I would	*The concept of **'Being wrong'** attributes of feedback in this context then are about seeing feedback as providing information on errors and mistakes. So linked to this theme is the concept of **'handling criticism'** and to successfully engage with feedback Helen believes that she needs to have this attribute. Does the theme of criticism or being wrong recur in any of the other transcripts? The comparison of compulsory versus optional feedback engagement may be worth exploring further.*
Because you know I don't know because like I haven't had the most lavish **lifestyle** as a kid and I think you know **I want to do well** so you know just for yourself kind of thing and to prove people wrong.	*I think there is a link to the graduate job market here and the idea of a better life. Leathwood & O'Connell students felt that the opportunity for graduate employment was a key reason to study and also came from backgrounds associated with poverty, low-paid jobs and unemployment.*
I think definitely because last year I was quite **annoyed at the people I didn't get**	*Students are dissatisfied when they don't receive feedback – does this tell me that*

feedback from and now I've got loads and I'm like yes.	*students value feedback?*
Yeah I feel like you know if I came to the end of the year and got a **bad grade** then I think like **that's my own fault**. I **should have listened** you know.	*Again is this about valuing feedback to improve? A link to hard work and motivation, accepting responsibility for own learning?*
But you know I think by getting this feedback it will **help me get better** at things because you know at school it was my worst module like the side of it writing up a report, but with Psychology you need to be able to write up reports and do things like that properly now.	*This suggests students believe that feedback can help them improve, close the gap. Does this contradict literature that says students can't use feedback, misunderstand feedback etc. Or is this about the perception of the value of feedback?*

My use of grounded theory principles (Strauss & Corbin, 1999) had enabled me to establish the 'what' was being said in the data. However, as I had started to make memos I had become interested in the 'how' of information was being said. It seemed that the students were telling stories to explain their experiences of feedback and the use of metaphors was apparent. It was at this stage that I felt an additional tool for analysis was appropriate to unpick the additional layer within the data (the stages my interview analysis went through are outlined in detail in Appendix 4). When I started to make memos it became apparent that what I actually had was narratives about the students' experiences as learners' and how this impacted on their engagement with feedback. Their stories were about much more than engaging with feedback as they related this to their prior experiences of education, the significance they attached to receiving feedback on their first assignment and how their interpretations of feedback comments were linked to beliefs about themselves as learners. These stories seemed to be about 'identity formation' (Cousin, 2009, p. 98), for example although they had become university students through the process of registering for a degree, what actually made them feel like university students was in part going through a series of processes and events linked to assignment feedback. The link students made between their past, the present and future

suggested that narrative inquiry may be an appropriate framework in which to analyse the data.

Narrative inquiry concentrates on how participants' make sense of their lives through their stories and experiences. There may be aspects of the students' stories that are specific to the individual however narrative inquiry also allows the researcher to identify common themes and patterns across the group. Within education research the technique of narrative inquiry is particularly useful for:

- Exploring development trajectories among learners or teachers
- Exploring transitions among learners (e.g. school to college)
- Generating understandings about particular learner experiences (Cousin, 2009, p. 93)

The way in which a researcher analyses and interprets participants' stories will shape the 'what' and the 'how' through the eyes of the researcher. Therefore narrative inquiry considers both what people say and how they say it (Cousin, 2009, p.94). There are a range of coding techniques which help support analysis underpinned by a narrative inquiry approach, for example: contrastive rhetoric, extremist talk and metaphors.

The approaches of contrastive rhetoric, extremist talk and metaphor have been useful tools by which to code my data. Contrastive rhetoric is used by participants' to make sense of their experiences; examples of contrastive rhetoric might include 'us and them', 'here and there' or 'past and present'. The use of 'past and present' was used as a way to compare previous and current experiences of education, whereas the use of 'us and them' was used as a way of differentiating between the students and lecturers. Extremist talk does not involve a comparison, but tends to focus on one end of a spectrum only and may be used by subordinate individuals. The table below summarises the differences between contrastive rhetoric and extremist talk.

Contrastive rhetoric	**Extremist talk**
Introduced by individuals making comparisons.	Introduced by institutionally subordinate individuals

Trivialised conceptions of actual alternative educational practices	Contains exaggerated or immoderate conceptions of existing educational practice
References made to both ends of the educational spectrum	References made to one end of educational spectrum only.
Low levels of commitment to mentioned alternatives	High levels of commitment to alternative interpretations
Leads to agreement	Leads to disagreement (but not always)
Centripetal affect – drawing in the boundaries of existing practice and consolidating them	Centrifugal effect – acting as a force for extending the boundaries of existing practice.

Adapted from Hargreaves & Woods (1984, p. 228) Table 18.1 Differences between contrastive rhetoric and extremist talk.

Although codes can take the form of a straightforward category label, the use of metaphor, for example is a more complex way of interpreting the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 56). A metaphor is a figure of speech with presents strong imagery or symbolisation, for example:

Students only seek help when they hit the buffers. (Henry, interview)

By highlighting what I believed to be concepts, I then began to be able to group and categorise the different phenomena that was discussed in the transcripts. These points were categorised into themes. I then went back to each transcript in turn and placed data extracts under the appropriate themes. I refined my data further through looking at my data analysis and making appropriate amendments such as the development of sub-themes and new themes. Having then gathered a list of concepts I was then able to identify the characteristics of each one. I transferred my data analysis into NVIVO 7 which gave me a clear overview of each code and the data attributed to it. Additionally, I had to balance my analysis of the transcripts with the participants' own social realities (I went back into the field to check the validity of my findings through re-interviewing five participants) to accurately bring their voice to the forefront of the research and not my interpretation of their voice.

Validity

I emailed a copy of each transcript to each participant for 'member checking' (Silverman, 2001) to ensure that participants agreed that the transcript was an accurate recording of what they had said and to give participants' the opportunity to add to or amend any of their comments. Both these processes were used to increase the validity of each transcript. My use of member-checks was a genuine attempt to ensure that participants were happy with their transcripts and if they wished to change or amend any comments. Just half of students replied to my email about the transcript, only two students made any amendments to their transcripts and these were grammatical amendments. As well as 'member checking' (Silverman, 2001), the validity in my research comes from context-rich, meaningful and 'thick' descriptions (Geertz, 1973), and through asking participants' to discuss the extent to which my analysis resonated with their perceptions of their feedback experiences and the acknowledgement of quirks and discrepancies in the data (Lather, 1986).

Triangulation is the use of a variety of research methods to enhance the validity of the findings. Triangulation is accepted in feminist research approaches because of the appropriateness of research methods to answer research questions (Kelly *et al.*, 1994). Time and space need to be considered so that data collection is carried out over a period of time at different times. My research was carried out over a period of 18 months and I collected data in semester 1 and semester 2 when students were at different stages of their university feedback experience. Dependability is often described as considering the extent to which the process of the study, including the research methods and researcher are consistent over time (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 278). I addressed the issue of dependability through consistency in the research process, for example, using the same interview questions, digitally recording all interviews and transcribing all the interviews myself.

Ethical issues

My discussion of ethical issues is used here as an indicator of my reflexivity. Cicourel (1964) argues the importance of explaining the set of circumstances and conditions that favourably or unfavourably influence data collection. The view that researchers occupy a more powerful position than participants has long been a concern within feminist research Olesen (in Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 234). However, this debate has evolved as researchers have looked more closely at the relationship with participants. The image of the powerless respondent has been

superseded by notions that power is only partial, transitory and often shifts throughout the research process between the researcher and the participants. My experience reflects Foucault's (1977) argument that the power is not stable and can be transitory. The power shifted between myself as the researcher and the interviewees throughout the research: researcher 'authority', researcher as an 'expert', participants 'exploiting' the interview process and participant 'empowerment'.

My identity could be seen as one of 'authority' and 'dominance' because I was asking the interview questions and probing for further explanation. Also as the researcher I was in a more powerful position because I had control over writing up the findings. A feminist research approach recommends that the interviewer is not dominant within the researcher – participant relationship and I tried to redress the power imbalance in other ways. I used personal disclosures about my own experiences of feedback as a way of developing rapport with students. Therefore by exposing my own vulnerabilities and weaknesses, I deflected from my 'authority' as a researcher. However as a postgraduate student receiving feedback, I could not pretend that my current life experience was the same as a first year undergraduate grappling with academic requirements. Consequently, it may be misleading to compare our life experiences as similar and the extent to which a relationship based on equality could really emerge.

Students' asked me questions or my opinion about feedback or asked me to help decipher written comments and give explanations of what I think the feedback comments may mean. I was confused as to whether the students viewed me as an expert with the knowledge to respond or as a friend helping them out. Issues around handwriting has meant that on several occasions I have been asked to proffer my opinion on the handwriting of lecturers as to help students to decipher what their feedback does actually say. Students' also asked questions, such as my opinion as to any link between improvements based on feedback comments and grades and my opinion on how to resolve unsatisfactory issues around the quality of the feedback, for example regarding making formal complaints about feedback. My experience resonated with Oakley's (1981 in Roberts, 1981, p. 43) who when interviewing women was asked a range of questions about pregnancy and childbirth, for example she had 31 requests for information regarding medical procedures and 21 relating to baby care/development/feeding and she states that she 'found it very difficult to avoid answering these questions as honestly and as fully as I could'. Although the questions I was asked were

not on such a personal theme as Oakley's, this was an uneasy relationship between my researcher role, the power I had and feeling 'disloyal' to the institution funding the research. I explained honestly to the students that in effect the university had commissioned the research project and that they acknowledged that feedback was an issue. I told the participants that I had been encouraged to have a 'recommendations' chapter and that I genuinely hoped the research would impact on feedback practises, although there was no way for me to specify how or guarantee that this would happen.

The 'voices' of the participants in the background study had meant that I wanted to reflect their voices in the main study (see Chapter 4: Methodology) to counteract any imbalances of power that they experienced, for example low self-esteem as a result of negative feedback and feelings of not being valued as individuals and not being recognised for the effort that they had put in to assignments, feelings of playing a game with much more powerful lecturers. My use of a feminist research aimed to 'empower' students. However, empowerment is defined as encouraging participants to act for themselves. I think this was perhaps an unrealistic aim of my methodology as on reflection I do not feel that the students were 'empowered' in the true sense of the word. Nevertheless, I feel that in a small way the interviews gave participants self-confidence, for example I encouraged students to make an appointment to see lecturers about their feedback so that they could get further feedback and I reassured them that this was an acceptable practice. Sometimes just being able to talk about and share experiences made students feel more confident as they realised that the issues that they had had with feedback were not actually a result of their own personal failings and being able to express emotions and feelings about feedback may have helped students to put their experiences into perspective. The students who were interviewed may not have changed the 'system', but some made changes to their own behaviour in response to the system, for example being more proactive in seeking feedback. Additionally, when the students are equipped with greater understanding and with new confidence in themselves, they can develop new strategies to address issues (Freire, 1996, p. 29). I felt that students use of me as a 'sounding board' around feedback issues gave them more confidence in their experiences and opinions and encouraged them to be more assertive, for example being clearer about the acceptability of asking a tutor for verbal feedback to supplement their written feedback.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have discussed my research design in this chapter. I have argued that the use of semi-structured interviews provided me with 'thick descriptions'.

'When I can't read it, some my lecturers have really bad handwriting and I just can't read their writing I haven't got a clue what they have said and it doesn't help me in the slightest, particularly if they going into detail and they are writing all over my work and it is like mangled up and most of the lecturers use red pen and I don't know it kind of gets to me if I open it up and its covered in red crosses and marks and its horrible it's like my work is bleeding it just puts me off from even reading it'. (Josie, interview)

I have discussed the other aspects of my research design which supported the interview data: reflective writing and questionnaires and the benefits these gave me such as the questionnaires in my research provided valuable descriptive statistics whilst the open-ended answers were thematically coded. I have explained how I drew upon the work of Strauss and Corbin (1998), contrastive rhetoric, extremist rhetoric (Hargreaves & Woods, 1984) and memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to code and refine my data. I have highlighted the complex ethical issues, such as power relations between the researcher and participants that emerged from my use of semi-structured interviews and how this may have influenced the data collection and analysis. I have discussed the issues of validity and dependability from a feminist inspired research approach and how I have addressed these issues, such as member checking, multiple interviews and discussing my analysis with participants. The next two chapters discuss the findings elicited from the semi-structured interviews, reflective writing documents and questionnaires discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 6: Findings

The findings show that the student experience of engaging with feedback had a deeply affective dimension. Researchers, such as Nicol & Macfarlane – Dick (2006), Hattie &

Timperley (2007), Young (2000), Handley (2007) and Yorke & Knight (2004) have suggested a link between emotions and feedback, but not explored this in detail. Varlander suggests that to date there has been limited research on the impact of emotions on engaging with feedback, 'there has been little research explicitly investigating the role of students' emotions in feedback situations' (2008, p. 146), although the role of emotions, particularly motivation (Dweck, 2000) and confidence (Barbalet, 1998) in learning have begun to be recognised**.** The students' stories highlighted a range of contrasting emotions associated with self-esteem, for example pride and anxiety, confidence and dejection. This chapter is divided into three sections: the first section focuses on the emotions associated with students' troubling journeys into higher education entry. The second section concentrates on the feelings attached to the feedback which had acted as a rite of passage, as they used it as fresh anchorage for reinvention. The final section concentrates on how the emotions associated with 'being wrong' shaped student engagement with feedback.

Troubling journeys

The students' entries into university were complicated because of academic set-backs. The students offer narratives that are anchored in poor schooling; as the following comments show, this schooling was variously experienced as a site of failure, struggle, discouragement, unhappiness and even trauma.

I really struggled and I failed quite a few of my subjects (Claire, interview)

My grades weren't the greatest in the world (Scott, interview)

I hated it, it was absolutely horrible. I found it really hard to make friends. In school I was just on my own and I was being bullied. I absolutely hated it. I left when I was 16. I got okay GCSE's but I found it really hard to concentrate and learn. My parents were quite surprised at how well I actually did… when I looked at the amount of points I'd got I hadn't got enough to do anything at university…I got in to do the HND but I thought being as this was the degree I might as well do this one. So once I'd got in and I went to the administrative staff and went and said is there any way I can change the degree I'm doing to Law and they

said yeah that's fine. So I don't think I've got enough points to do Law, but I have got in now. (Josie, interview)

Well I had a basic schooling, no O levels or A levels… he [the teacher] said your maths is hopeless – you will never be a pilot. (Henry, interview)

Well I'd done like basic schooling (Shireen, interview*)*

I went to school, after that A levels, it was three years in sixth form, also at the same time three years of one day a week evening classes for my maths GCSE (Anthony, interview)

The way in which students talked about these troubling journeys into higher education indicated how this had damaged their self-esteem and confidence about their capability as learners. So regardless of the length of time since students' last experiences of learning their emotions were characterised by a lack of confidence based on a sense of a failure to achieve academically. Not only did the negative effects of past schooling experiences structure many of the responses I received, suggesting the pull of these experiences, it also signalled the capacity of these emotions to migrate into higher education. A further indication of the emotional impact of these past educational experiences was indicated through the participants' use of contrastive rhetoric. There are several lines of sociological argument which suggest that the business of making contrasts is a widespread feature of interactional and conversational practice (Hargreaves & Woods, 1984, p. 221). Contrasts are either explicitly or implicitly involved in all descriptions, since all our conceptions of what things are, are also constructed according to the corollaries of what they are not and such rhetorical accounting devices justify what speakers say and believe. The use of such contrastive rhetoric may be identified in many social settings, in which participants create accounts based on distinctions between 'us and them', 'past and present' and 'here and there'. The quotes below derived from my interview data indicate how Helen used the contrastive rhetoric of 'past and present' to understand her experiences of education:

Oh I did terrible. I just like messed around you know **'past and present'**
I wasn't really interested, but as I got older you know you want to do well you are more motivated because you know

the outcome in the end. Yeah I was like in the bottom class when I was a little kid about 5, then I worked myself up and then in my last year at school I was in the top set which was a good achievement for me. I thought I'd come to uni to be good at Psychology. (Helen, interview)

Helen's experiences also suggest the difficulties she had faced in education and the impact being in the 'bottom class' had on her self-esteem, the impact of this is also recognised by Ingleton:

'Past emotions and memories may be experienced consciously or unconsciously in the present, and are ongoing in the maintenance of self-esteem and identity. More than the product of individual personalities and experiences, they are constitutive of social settings that comprise interpersonal relationships of power and control in institutional settings. Emotions shape learning and teaching experiences for both teachers and students, and the recognition of their significance merits further consideration in both learning theory and pedagogical practice' (Ingleton, 1999, p. 9).

Noteworthy were the participants' comments about having triumphed over adversity by succeeding at entering university as the first in their family, but students felt that they got to university *despite* the hindrances about which they spoke. The students were proud at being finally accepted at university.

University was something in this distance, but I'm here now. (Henry, interview)

*I'm the first, the first so far out of my entire family [to attend university]. (*Scott, interview)

My Mum always pushed me like all the time to go to university she said because obviously she'd had money problems, financial problems herself she was like erm you know I want you to do well for yourself, but I never really listened because I was so young and naive. However when I had my own family that's when I realised that's what pushed me to get here. So she's really chuffed I'm at university. (Shazeen, interview)

Ingleton (1999) explored the students' experiences of mathematics at primary and tertiary level. 'It appears that emotions can be powerful in encouraging and inhibiting effective learning and approaches to study, but educational research and models of learning have shed little light on the interrelationships between emotions and learning' (p. 1). The two most common emotions in education are shame and pride (Ingleton, 1999). She also states that pride is related to self-confidence and is a pre-condition for successful learning. 'The dynamics of pride and shame and identity, in the context of experiences of success and failure, may dispose students to act positively or negatively towards learning' (Ingleton,1999, p. 1). However, the emotion of pride which was expressed by the students in my study was also mixed with self-doubt, believing much of their acceptance at university had been down to 'chance'. The problematic nature of gaining entry to university meant that even where students narrated incidences of achievement, they translated these as matters of *'luck'* or *'surprise'*.

To my amazement I actually got in. I was surprised to say the least. (Debbie, interview)

I had to go to the interview and many people in this year had problems with the final English test and because of that had to take the test with Mr Smith but luckily I passed and he was saying that he was considering whether to approve or reject me, but he decided to approve me. (Peter, interview)

Being accepted at university was not enough to allay their fears about their capability to study at university level. They were anxious and often commented on what they perceived to be their 'weaknesses'.

I need to be reassured that I'm doing the right thing or going in the right direction I mean I'm not brilliant at grammar like commas and semi-colons I'm rubbish at stuff like that. (Josie, interview)

You know I haven't studied for the past 8, 9 years so it has kind of gone out the window. That's more of a struggle. (Arvind, interview)

Last year I started some computer course, which I'm really glad that I did. I'm already struggling a bit with that side of things. (Toyah, interview)

I realised that how the students perceived themselves as learners was influential in how they would learn in higher education and subsequently respond to and engage with feedback. I had not set out in my research to explore the learner identities of my participants, nevertheless when analysing the data it had become apparent that what the students' had provided me with was narratives about their experiences of learning (the use of narratives is discussed in more detail in the research design chapter on page 84). Significantly these identities were not of 'strong' learners and this suggested that this may influence the students' experiences of feedback. As the students did not view themselves as successful learners their learner identities could be described as 'fragile' (Gallacher *et al.*, 2002, p.43) which meant they entered university lacking confidence in their academic capability (a more in-depth discussion of the impact of learner identity is explored and the implications for feedback provision in the next findings chapter on page 122). Other researchers (Weil, 1986; Gorard & Rees, 2002) also contend that a key aspect of a student's learner identity is formed by their prior experiences of education and their beliefs about their capability as a learner. Yorke & Knight (2004) argue the self theories of students are a neglected aspect of higher education, yet are influential in student development and achievement. The information on the students' troubling journeys into higher education highlights that they felt they were taking huge academic and personal 'risks' in going to university, in terms of coping academically. Therefore this concept of 'learner identity' provides a broad context in which to understand student engagement with feedback. Crozier *et al.*, (2008) and Bowl (2001) also found that a combination of academic and personal issues appeared to shape the learner identities of their 'non-traditional' participants, as they too entered university lacking confidence in their academic capability, suggesting their emotions reflected that of my own research participants.

Absences in data can tell their own story. The lack of discussion about the social aspects of university was apparent in the interview analysis. The aspect of university my students focused on was their academic capability, unlike, for example, the middle class students in the Crozier *et al*., (2008) study who emphasised the social aspects of student life, for example living away from home, making friends and social events. Indeed, the students in my study tended to value the development of academic skills at university and the opportunity of accessing the improved employment prospects they believed were available to graduates. The transitional process that my participants went through to 'belong' at university focused on the academic aspects of university life linked closely to their self-confidence about their

capability to learn. Thus, the students in my study had much narrower parameters for measuring their success at university in comparison to, for example the middle class students in the Crozier *et al*., (2008) study. Coping with assessment requirements and justifying the higher 'risks' they were taking personally and academically was the focus of the university experience for my students. Their acceptance at university could only be justified in relation to successful learning outcomes, congruent with their sense of entitlement to be at university (only if they were 'good enough' academically). Many of the students only came onto university campus for lectures and then went back home and focused on their family and/or work commitments and so their opportunities to be part of the social aspects of university were limited. Therefore the students in my study were likely to attach more significance to feedback because of their more narrow focus on academic aspects of university life.

Waiting for permission

The emotions associated with a sense of previous academic failure, such as fear and anxiety were difficult to become free of and this emanated itself in a lack of confidence. The students' acceptance at university was still tentative in their minds. The students had not entered university with an identity of being 'undergraduates', instead they were waiting for 'permission' to become university students and their first assignment feedback would act as a rite of passage to student-hood. The concept of liminality seems relevant here; liminality is an anthropological concept which addresses a state of betwixt and between two positions (van Gennep, 1960). The origins of the term liminality are also associated with (Turner, 1969), an anthropologist whose work explores ritual and symbols in traditional African tribes. Turner's definition of liminality described a transitional period and status during rites of passage. Well known examples would be the state of teenagers who are not yet adults and not quite children. A liminal space is by definition an unstable one in which the people experiencing it are unclear about their status. Rites of passage are designed to restore stability and clarify a person's status. Meyer and Land (2005) call for a more extensive development of the notion of liminality within learning, as their work focuses on aspects of disciplines which can be problematic. My use of the concept of liminality does not focus on *what* students learn in specific disciplines, but *how* that learning is influenced. In particular, I use the concept of liminality to explore the role emotions play in that learning, with specific reference to engaging with feedback as part of that learning process. This notion of liminality and the significance of a rite of passage to overcome it perfectly captures the students' testimonies

about waiting for their first assignment and the importance of 'permission giving' feedback discussed below:

*You are thinking have I done the right thing? Have I made a fool of myself? What am I doing here? Am I doing the right thing? Everyone is younger than me am I making a fool of myself, are they all going to laugh at me? You have all that going round in your head. (*Zahara, interview)

It was wondering whether what I'd learnt previously whether I could just do the same and then see if it was the same sort of level or not (Claire, interview)

Waiting to see what happens and see what the final result is [assignment feedback] (John, interview)

We were stressing more on that one [first assignment] (Parmjit, interview)

I think feedback is important if you can get it as soon as possible because you're already anxious as to how good the work is and the longer it takes to get feedback you start thinking of all sorts of things like maybe I didn't do it quite well and then you have got others things that you are working on and you want to get through one thing and then the next because you want to improve on the next piece of work so if you don't get feedback as soon as you can you can't really improve on what you have done before. I think that is the only thing about feedback and I'd appreciate it if it was given back quicker. (Gillian, interview)

I was really, really scared because it was my first report. I had to hand it in just to see where I am at. Where am I standing? (Katya, interview)

There was a lot of anxiety I suppose wondering have I taken the right approach? The first assignment was just horrendous… we all sort of fumbled in the dark with it but in a weird and warped way you're not the only one who is panicking so you think well it's not just me being thick. (Zahara, interview)

I mean that's definitely something that is pending [assignment feedback]. Without the support you are thrown in the deep end and I feel like I've stayed in the deep end. (Zahara, interview)

The first assignment then acted as an initiation ceremony into becoming a student and the students were 'stuck' in a space of anxiety and concern until they received their feedback. The rituals or states of liminality which Turner (1969) analyses tend to be transformative in function, and usually involve an individual or group being altered from one state into another. Turner argues that as a result of the ritual the participating individual acquires new knowledge and subsequently a new status and identity within the community. This transition however is often problematic, troubling, and frequently involves the humbling of the participant. Another indication of the students being in a liminal period, is further highlighted by the work of Turner when considering Zahara's comments about them *'all...fumbling in the dark'*, suggesting that all the students were a collective who were supporting each other. Turner found that the relationships among liminal individuals were of extreme equality. Within the liminal period, individuals often assumed what Turner calls 'structural invisibility', (1969, p. 99). They had no status, property, kinship rank, or any other marker that would distinguish them from their fellow liminal individuals. There was no hierarchy within the group and everyone was in flux in terms of their individual identity. This liminal state then was dependent on waiting for the assignment feedback, as the example described by Gillian indicates the powerful role lecturers play as students wait to complete this rite of passage. The lecturers can be seen as 'feedback-givers' who were also positioned as 'permission-givers' by allowing students to pass through this initiation into student-hood.

Lecturer as a 'significant other'

It seemed clear from the interview data that the students needed to hear from a lecturer as their 'significant other' to confirm that they were in the 'right' place**,** as the possibility of learning with confidence springs from the social relationships in the learning environment (Barbalet, 1998). The students were waiting for confirmation from tutors to say they were entitled to be at university. This casts the lecturers in the light of the 'significant other' with the role of deciding if students could become students or not. Sociologically the 'significant other' is any person (in this case a lecturer) who has a strong influence on an individual's self-evaluation (in this case the 'right' to study at university) and can play a formative role in shaping behaviour and is derived from Mead's theory of the self (Marshall, 1998). Mead

highlights the ability of social actors to take the role of others. There are many others whose roles may be taken – ranging from those of strangers to that of the whole community. Significant others are those who have an important influence or play a formative role in shaping the behaviour of another. Mead often refers collectively to significant others 'the organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called "the generalized other" (Mead, 1934 p. 154). In this case then, the significant other was an individual who was part of the academic community. The work of Turner (1969) also supports this concept of the 'significant other' through the concept of a 'guide'. Typically 'guides' were members of the community who helped individuals negotiate this undefined status or liminal state and prepared them for the transition to their new status, for example adulthood. Thus, there was some stability offered to these individuals embarking on a journey to the unknown.

The feedback from the 'significant other' acted as a self-fulfilling prophecy, if students were told they could be successful, they could be successful. They could not learn until they had been given 'permission'. They were waiting to start learning and could not invest in their learning until then.

If you are going into a field you have come to learn you don't know exactly if what you are doing is the right thing that they want. So if you do get the feedback, you are able to assess yourself. I am on the right lines. I am understanding the subject. So it's very important to have feedback. (Gillian, interview)

The role of the lecturer as a 'significant other' and the impact of their care towards students has not been explored in detail within other higher education research. Subsequently, I have drawn on the work of Birch & Ladd (1997) who focused on the teacher as a 'significant other' and indicated the importance of care in the teacher-child relationship, particularly when settling into school. Although my research focuses on a different demographic group, interesting parallels can still be drawn between my findings and that of Birch & Ladd (1997). For example, closeness, dependency and conflict were related to various aspects of children's adjustment to school. Dependency in the teacher-child relationship emerged as strongly correlating with difficulties in adjusting to school, including poorer academic performance, more negative attitudes towards school and less positive engagement with the school environment. Gatto's discussion of the hidden curriculum also seems appropriate here, as he

highlights the emotional dependency that is encouraged in education, 'I teach kids to surrender their will to the predestinated chain of command' (2006, p. 6). In my study the past negative learning experiences, fragile learner identities and the dependence on lecturers for 'permission giving' feedback by the students also suggests that dependence on lecturers for support and confirmation was high as settling into university was a complex process. Gatto also explores the permission-giving process, arguing that self-esteem is provisional 'a kid's self-respect should depend on expert opinion. My kids are constantly evaluated and judged' (2006, p. 9). In addition, Birch and Ladd (1997) found that conflict with teachers influenced the extent to which children liked school (or not) and was also linked to avoiding school. The tension students in my study reported due to unapproachable staff who did not care (as shown in model 1 on page 117 of chapter 7) suggests that there was resentment of lecturers and this was linked to disillusionment, for example *'They didn't reply to my emails and I've lost interest, I can't be bothered now'* (Yvette, interview). Yet, teacher-child closeness was positively linked with children's academic performance, liking school and self-directed learning in the Birch & Ladd study. This resonates with my findings of not only lecturers being cast as a 'significant other' in the eyes of my students, but also that caring about the students also had a strong impact on their motivation and self-esteem in learning, *'They [lecturers] just helped you so much and then if you wanted to see them then they would talk to you what you did right or what you did wrong and they would spend as much time as they needed with you to get the best'* (Byron, interview).The work of Thomas (2002) also focuses on the importance of the caring role lecturers in higher education can play in student motivation and capacity for successful learning, highlighting as in my findings that it is important to consider the various aspects of students' relationships with lecturers as they make the transition to becoming university students.

This has implications for the way lecturers give feedback in terms of students' expectations of feedback and the type of comments that lecturers include in assignment feedback (this is explored in more detail in the next finding chapter – Chapter 7). The work of Brown & Armstrong (1982) indicated that within the context of the transition from primary school to secondary school that teachers misjudged and underestimated the things that worried pupils, suggesting that there may be mismatches between the problems that pupils actually have and the support provided by teachers. Arguably, the same experience of lecturers misunderstanding and misjudging student anxiety in their transition to university was apparent in my own findings as the affective impact of feedback may not have been fully

understood by lecturers. Feedback could act as a 'boost' to self-esteem and confirming that they 'belonged' at university. Equally, it could damage self-esteem, challenging both their sense of identity and the decision they had made to study at university. Meyer & Land (2005) use the idea of 'threshold concepts' to understand the troublesome knowledge students acquire, this can be viewed as a 'door' through which students have to pass and the space they inhabit as they move sometimes closer or further away from the 'door'. Although Meyer and Land (2005) use the threshold concept in relation to knowledge in particular, I think this concept is applicable when considering students' emotions as they engage with feedback. The concept of going through the 'door' is applicable to the students who received positive feedback as this enabled them to have the confidence to engage with the feedback.

Fresh anchorage for reinvention

As discussed above waiting for the first assignment feedback was a rite of passage to university which would confirm (or not) their capability to study at university as 'real students'. Positive feedback could confirm their successful transition to being a university student and become fresh anchorage for their 'new start' or reinvention. Negative feedback would challenge their transition to university study. Overall it seemed that the feedback students received on their first assignments was much more than a commentary on their assignment, but was being used as a rite of passage to university education. The initiation ceremony of receiving positive feedback would mark their transition to finally becoming undergraduates. The confidence that students gained from this positive feedback increased their self-esteem and gave them permission to start learning at university as they had now become university students. Confidence functions in opposition to emotions, such as anxiety and dejection. Confidence is a very important emotion in learning as it is the only emotion with time as its object: 'All action is based upon the confidence which apprehends a possible future' (Barbalet, 1998, p. 82). Hattie & Timperley (2007, p. 92) report that confident students are more likely to engage with feedback and Weiss (2000) comments that the more emotionally engaged a learner is the more likely he or she will be able to learn.

My feedback was positive they thought it was a good first draft and that they looked forward to reading more (Debbie, interview)

It's a new start here. (Lily, interview)

I was really worried about failing. So I thought I'll put as much effort as I can in because that's where I'm struggling and then when I got my grade back I did better than I thought and it's probably one of the best grades so far (Helen, interview)

I think it is important to know that you are on the right track so in that respect I do think that feedback is very important and without feedback you're sort of groping in the dark really and also obviously if there are any glaring errors then that could be highlighted...I can't imagine a point in time when I don't think feedback would be useful personally. (Zahara, interview)

I got like for my introduction it said it read well, well said meaning that the way I had put it was quite good meaning like the structure and erm and just defines the topic, because she went on to say your topic shows the direction and explains the topic, defines the topic and gives you an idea what the essay is going to talk about. 'Fantastic' which was one of the paragraphs the statement she made and she said that statement it's like it summarises the thesis, so that it was a very good point. There was only one negative response which was that I hadn't mentioned one or two sources for my work so she did say to improve on citing my sources for my work. (Gillian, interview)

Yeah because it was like pointing me in the right direction of what path to go down with certain paragraphs and certain opinions and resources that I had put down, so he was saying maybe you could do it from this angle and then obviously the feedback I was thinking of it and then just going down that path that bit that had been criticised or whatever mainly for the literature review because I had four sources and basically I just had to be comparing and contrasting as well just go into a bit more emphasis with them really. So I was quite happy with that. (John, interview)

I was very happy with feedback because most of it was positive anyway (laughter). Because it had been my first essay since I had been in university and I was quite nervous about it and thinking 'oh dear' do I really know what I am supposed to be doing. A lot of questions at the back of your mind, but the way it came back it was like positive and it made me more confident and told me the areas which I was weak and the areas which I was strong in. So it was very informative. (Gillian, interview)

Yeah it was good. There was praise as well that was good it really motivated me I used that because that had helped me and prove that cus I saw how I did it and I was praised for it and I used that in the second one. (Parmjit, interview)

Constructive comments intended to help me improve (open-ended questionnaire response)

Feedback that is constructive and quite positive. (open-ended questionnaire response)

I think it is great sometimes I got erm a well done or good writing or good paragraphing and I feel so happy about that because I got a lot of achievement from my module and 'oh I did a right thing from here' and the other way sometimes if I got it wrong and I'm okay so I have to improve my part or this part. (Alex, interview)

What makes feedback positive is when they tell you that you've done things right , but at the same time they don't just say this is all rubbish, kind of thing because you've put work into it and you don't do that to get a bad grade, you do the work because you want to get a good grade. So it's nice when they tell you what you've done right as well as what you could do to improve. Don't just say you've done this wrong. (Shireen, interview)

If students received positive written feedback, they were more likely to want a verbal discussion about their feedback. These verbal exchanges had a profound impact on student motivation and confidence (which was important because the interviews often indicated that the students lacked confidence). They felt that lecturers who took the time to have a dialogue with them about their feedback cared about them, this in turn motivated them further as they did not want to let down the tutor after they had spent time going through their feedback with them. Questionnaire participants also highlighted the significance they placed on verbal feedback in the 46 out of 83 open-ended responses citing this, again supporting the finding that verbal feedback is very important to student self esteem as it boosts motivation and confidence. Van Krogh (1998, p. 85) suggests that the concept of care may contribute to our understanding of the preconditions for learning, as care promotes trust and support. 'Care' can be defined as 'a feeling of concern and interest' and provides examples of this, for

example it might describe the way parents behave towards their child or the way a teacher behaves towards his student, as these quotes below indicate:

Some have given me a detailed analysis or one on one sessions. I have found that the latter has been the most useful, as you understand more the processes you must go through to improve, and it feels as though a more personal approach has been taken. (Clarissa, reflective writing)

I was just asking her questions I was asking her what needed to be done and then she just decided to email everyone and tell them what needed to be done for it anyway and I think that's what people mostly did. (Shireen, interview)

It's been good and I've been happy with it. You can speak to the lecturer at the end after the lecture. (Yvette, interview)

The second assignment I finished my first draft early on so the last lecture of the last lecture we had the lecturer said you can either book an appointment for next week or you can see us at the end of the session if you've done a draft and want feedback I was only one of two, sorry three people stayed behind I was the only one who had work to show to take in this is what I've done. I showed her the feedback that I had and explained I'd tried to address each of the issues and whether she could comment on if I'd addressed it or not so that's how I went about getting feedback on that. (Stefan, interview)

They just helped you so much and then if you wanted to see them then they would talk to you what you did right or what you did wrong and they would spend as much time as they needed with you to get the best. (Byron, interview)

Many of the students interviewed spoke highly of the staff that had helped them, suggesting that students place a high value on opportunities to have a dialogue around their feedback. However, this experience of 'care' was not necessarily typical. For some students this did not happen, as the quotes below indicate:

You get the impression that the lecturers are too busy, that they don't care about the students. (Henry, interview)

You're [the lecturer] talking to people like me who did badly...and you're [the lecturer] asking us to do it again and categorically said there would be no help… You going to get into trouble anyway and there is no way forward and the lecturer said we are not going to get help and you are not going to get any tutorials and everyone is in a panic and so I handed it and thought well if I get a D5 it will be acceptable because it will at least be a pass. (Zahara, interview)

Students are not happy you are coming out drained and sensitive and you think the feedback has done this to me… The lecturers have a sort of draconian sort of attitude a 'well take it or leave it attitude' and they really do have to be different to help us come out the other end. If they leave it [continue with the same attitude] then we are going to fail. (Henry, interview)

The use of contrastive rhetoric was again apparent here as a student used an 'us and them' contrast to make sense of their relationship with lecturers:

*Feedback in *subject is a problem, you're just given your assignment and then don't get any help. It's like they are too important and won't touch us. They think they are better than us.* (Debbie, interview)

Students in the Leathwood & O'Connell (2003) study also made similar points about care as 'Many of those who acknowledged that they were struggling academically felt that this was compounded by a lack of support from the university' (Leathwood & O'Connell, 2003 p.610). The Leathwood & O'Connell's longitudinal study at an inner-city post-1992 university with a strong commitment to access and widening participation was adopted to explore the learning experiences of 310 students throughout their degree studies (Psychology, Business, Computing and Film Studies) and for two to three years after graduation. Indeed, a dominant theme that emerged throughout the study is the desire on the part of the vast majority of students for a greater degree of contact with and support from teaching staff. The majority of the students in the first year felt that they had been expected to be 'independent' too early in their studies and that they had been left to 'sink or swim'.

This concept of ‘sink or swim’ was also used by my students, not only as a powerful metaphor, but also as an indication of ‘extremist talk’. Extremist talk (as discussed in the research design chapter on page 85) is different from contrastive rhetoric as it does not make comparisons, but instead uses one view point only (Hargreaves & Woods, 1984, p. 228). Hargreaves & Woods also note that extremist talk is part of the repertoire of subordinate figures, which seems appropriate to my analysis. For example, students’ often felt (perhaps subconsciously) that there was a power dynamic between themselves and the lecturers, with the lecturers having ‘control’ over them and their futures. Extremist talk is stated in a matter of fact way as a generalized commentary, in this case on the nature of schooling and the education system. Extremist talk therefore consists of a critique of what is. Extremist talk involves high levels of commitment on the part of the speaker to his/her observations on and critiques of the workings of the education system and is only addressed to one end of the values system. The quotes below indicate examples of extremist talk within my interviews with students about the lack of care from lecturers:

So they can’t go to them and say I’m hacked off **‘Lecturer shouts at students’**
or I don’t understand what you are on about because
he thinks he’s going to bawl his head off because
you know some teachers and tutors like to bawl. (Henry, interview)

‘**Students drop out because they are not supported by lecturers’**

They are being rubbished quickly or too
early in something they are not quite sure
about and they are being flattened you know
and then they are giving up so we are losing all
these people [students]. You can’t be harsh like that,
entertain what they say and write about, even if what
they say is wrong let them come back again. Because
what you want is for your own team or whoever you
are working with to succeed and if you just slam them
and rubbish them, then they leave or get depressed or
give up the work. (Henry, interview)

‘Lecturers do not have time to give feedback’

I think if they had more lecturers than they would have more time to look at the work more efficiently and give better feedback. (Byron, interview)

The quotes above indicate the perceived impact a lack of care by lecturers, framed as ‘significant others’ by students, suggesting that this can extend the liminal state they experience. The themes of a lack of care and a low sense of entitlement to university support in the learning experience was linked to receiving negative feedback on first assignments and then seeped through to later stages of feedback as students discuss surviving at university (as discussed further on page 114). Further confirmation of the importance of permission giving feedback comes from the following students. What seems to be the case from these comments is an extension of the state of liminality, a state well described by the following student as ‘*sand slipping through your fingers’*.

The first assignment in and it has really knocked my confidence... you feel the sand slipping through your fingers and you think it’s a bad start to the semester and it has knocked my confidence. (Zahara, interview)

The first time I saw the grade and the feedback from the marker my confidence level was so low I thought how I’m going to get through this? I was really shocked and really disappointed as well it really knocked me because I was thinking you know how did this happen…to tell you the truth the feedback on this assignment was not positive at all I don’t think there was any positive comments. (Arvind, interview)

The worst feedback was I won’t mention the [lecturer’s] name basically had one comment –‘ disappointing.’ (Stefan, interview)

'Bad' feedback can be one of the worst roadblocks a student can face. If feedback isn’t constructive, and simply points out the flaws in an essay or piece of writing, I know from personal experience that not only is it very soul destroying but it also makes a student doubt their ability to write, thus resulting in a worse essay. When feedback is difficult to understand it is pointless and redundant, both for the student and the teacher, not being able to understand feedback can be very frustrating. (Adida, reflective writing)

Personal, positive feedback impacts upon our mental attitude. If we continually receive grades lower than we anticipate, with little explanation, or worse- with negative feedback and clumsy criticism- then we may become struck by the belief that we're wasting our time, the "Why bother?" mentality becoming draining and pervasive. (Nicolette, reflective writing)

I was really hurt. I was devastated. Although I knew that I haven't done well the feedback was quite negative only the first sentence said it was a nice attempt, but then a long row of negative things. So I was really devastated I was really hurt. For the first few days I was just in an upset mood. And I couldn't get over it and then I said to myself the approach is not correct. And if I have this approach I'm never going to make it. The advice they are giving me is to improve myself so I started working off the words. (Katya, interview)

The negative emotions evoked by the feedback may make a response difficult. The difficulty in overcoming negative emotions when receiving feedback should not be underestimated. The findings suggest that it takes students a long time to engage with feedback when it has had a negative emotional impact on them, particularly on their first assignments, as they remain in a liminal state not yet having made the transition to student-hood. The experiences of students' who received negative feedback on their first assignments can be likened to the concept of 'stuck places' highlighted by Ellsworth (1997). Ellsworth describes these stuck places as, 'terms that shape a student's knowledge, her forgetting, her circles of stuck places and resistances' (1997, p. 71). These students in my study were indeed stuck as they remained in the liminal space waiting to enter the threshold to student-hood. The transformation can be protracted, over considerable periods of time and involve oscillation between states, often with temporary regression to earlier status. 'In the light of these observations, liminality, we argue can provide a useful metaphor in aiding our understanding of the conceptual transformations students undergo, or find difficulty and anxiety in undergoing, particularly in relation to notions of being 'stuck'. Stuck places may occasion difficulty by presenting "epistemological obstacles"'(Meyer & Land, 2005, p. 377). Within educational settings it would appear that, on the part of the learner, there may be inability to achieve the new (transformed) status, occasioning a similar form of mimicry as a result of the 'stuck place' (Ellsworth, 1997) in which they find themselves.

Being wrong

A related dimension to that of discouraging feedback and ‘stuck places’ concerns the extent to which students found it hard to differentiate between 'getting it wrong' and 'being wrong'. Getting it wrong was a state of being rather than a cognitive error that yields to correction**.** Kuhn (1995, p. 609) likens this to students experiencing ‘a constant fear of never getting it right’, this is supported by Ingleton who argues ‘the classroom is the site of constant social interaction centring on approval and disapproval for being right and being wrong’ (1999, p. 9). Feedback which centred on what was 'wrong' was read as a personal criticism which the students were all too ready to accept. This acceptance may hook into old wounds as suggested on page 91 of this chapter. The first quote below presents the powerful image of a student’s work 'bleeding' with the red penned objections of the marker. It is quite possible in this example that the comments were helpful and thoughtful but the student’s vulnerability shaped her view of the feedback. Engaging with feedback is difficult when students have to overcome the negative emotions which can emerge when reading their feedback. Josie’s comment suggests that the feedback can almost be seen as a physical attack on the assignment and the student who wrote the assignment. The negative emotions associated with the perceived damage to the assignment may be lowered self-esteem and evoke feelings of hurt, anger and disappointment.

They are writing all over my work and it is like mangled up and most of the lecturers use red pen and I don’t know it kind of gets to me if I open it up and it’s covered in red crosses and marks and it’s horrible. It’s like my work is bleeding. (Josie, interview)

Students often applied a deficit model to their own ability to learn, believing they did not have the ability to understand the feedback, which goes back to the emotions of failure and fear that they started university with. They blamed themselves when they could not understand feedback. Arguably, this also links into Dweck’s (2000) notion of intelligence as a fixed trait. Students who see their intelligence as a fixed entity are less likely to believe in their capability to improve and develop. As the following quotes show, the first impulse of the students was to blame themselves, to draw attention to felt inadequacies.

When you can’t learn from what you are doing wrong so you can’t improve your future work it does not tell you what you are doing wrong in terms of you are not doing enough analysis.

How you are not would be more helpful, it can't take me anywhere except to know that I can't do analysis. It's like negative, demoralising because it doesn't give you how to improve. (Zahara, interview)

Further depth is a little bit vague and I'm not exactly the brightest spark…I can analyse something, but critically analysing something is a bit of a different story because it is slightly different. So applying that was very difficult to do. (Scott, interview)

Feedback that consists of simple, one word comments along the margin, such as 'no!' or a question mark, provides no explanation as to what is wrong or how to improve. (Danni, reflective writing)

For sure I think about. I mean receive the feedback and my response is well for sure I'm thinking about what I have done and focus on the wrong parts of the work were outlined by the tutor and try not to repeat to these problems , but it is easier in theory not practice.
(Peter, interview)

I feel that the best kind is always detailed and specific. When a piece of writing I have done has been marked and I simply get a cross by something I do not know how to change that particular section. (Michaela, reflective writing)

If it says this is absolute rubbish again it is not very constructive because in my mind you think you have done what is necessary but it hasn't worked. (Henry, interview)

When I've received the feedback I should look at the points that they have made, and work on my shortcomings. (Katya, interview)

I don't know what she is saying [feedback comments], is she saying I'm being stupid?
(Zahara, interview)

Rightly Yorke (2003) and Boud (1995) point out the difference between critique of an assignment and critique of the person who produced the assignment. My evidence suggests that even where this difference is clearly made, the student cannot proceed unless forms of encouragement accompany the feedback. Moreover, it seems likely that students with the

kind of histories already indicated find making a separation between the assignment and self much more difficult. They arrive at university with formative wounds that infect how they read any kind of feedback. Dweck (1999) highlights that personality influences responses to difficulty and failure. Students with a negative orientation are more likely to 'see failure as a reflection on their (perceived low) ability' (Yorke, 2003, p. 488). Butler's (1988) study with 132 11-year old Israeli students assessed student interest and performance with three different forms of feedback treatment: grade only, comment and grade, comments only. When students received comments only there were greater learning gains with interest and performance remaining high. Conversely, the study found that when feedback comments were accompanied by a grade this generally reduced both interest and performance because grades had a negative impact on the self. Yorke (2003, p. 489) also argues that students may lose confidence if the distinction between product and person is not made, giving the example of 'I am a failure' may dominate over 'I didn't understand what was expected of me'. Boud (1995, p. 45) states that 'too often the distinction between giving feedback on a specific product, which has been produced by a person, and judging them as a person is not made'.

Although the students understood that the feedback could help them improve, in order to do this effectively they would have to deal with emotions of being 'wrong', such as their sense of failure and disappointment.

I guess if no one tells you what you've done wrong you don't really know what to improve on. (Shazeen, interview)

Nobody likes being told that they're wrong but I think you've got to do it you know. (Helen, interview)

I still think they should carry on with it. It [feedback] does help students to know where they are going wrong. (Veena, interview)

The negative associations of being 'wrong' had an emotional impact on self-esteem and levels of motivation which may make it difficult for students to engage with the feedback. Students may perceive their role as learners as being to 'obtain knowledge from the "all knowing" instructor and believe that there are certain and absolute answers' (Baxter

Magolda, 1992, p. 36). However, students recognised the purpose of feedback as supporting improvements in learning. Very much like a person swallowing cod-liver oil because it is 'good' for them, the process of 'trying' to engage with feedback was seen as an unpleasant, but necessary trial to go through. The way in which students couched their engagement with feedback with the terms of 'try' and 'attempt', suggests very much that the actual process of engagement with feedback was often elusive and they mimicked doing what they believed engagement with feedback to be. The concept of mimicry 'seems to involve both attempts at understanding and troubled misunderstanding, or limited understanding, and is not merely intention to reproduce information in a given form' (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 72). This concept of mimicry is useful for understanding the students' attempts to engage with feedback, in particular perhaps for the students who have remained in those 'stuck places'.

You know you should try to address it [feedback] you should because at the end of the day you are going to suffer if you don't. (Helen, interview)

First of all pick it up, read it, try to understand it and put it into practice and speak to the lecturer if you don't understand it. (Yvette, interview)

The Leathwood & O'Connell (2003) study was considering the learning experience of students in generally and did not specifically focus on feedback. However, they do make the pertinent observation that 'it is apparent that the impact of what are perceived to be poor assessment results on those with low self-esteem, who already feel that they can never be good enough or never get it right, can be profound' (p. 609) which is congruent with my own findings. This may explain why for the students in my study engaging with the feedback did not necessarily happen as soon as the feedback has been received. For example, students referred to feedback they had received at the end of semester one when they were writing assignments in semester two.

I think it builds on it you take certain things from year one if you like and you keep those things and then in the second year again you take certain elements from the feedback so you are building up all the time the feedback particularly the technical side of things like what the lecturers are looking for, critical analysis that sort of thing. The feedback you receive will help towards other modules is what I suppose I'm trying to say. So even if you don't take all the feedback on board on a particular module because you are building on the feedback

and can remember certain things from each assignment that you get back so it does help. (Stefan, interview)

This suggests that engaging with feedback is not an immediate process for students and indicates a need for emotional distance before students can start to engage with the feedback. The social-constructivist approach to assessment and feedback by Rust *et al*., (2005) suggests that a range of feedback strategies, such as generic feedback may encourage students to consider their learning goals and support closing the 'feedback loop'. However, this approach does not consider how the affective responses to positive and negative feedback may make attempts to use feedback problematic. The social-constructivist approach also suggests that 'a clear connection between learning processes and outcomes' and 'explicit assessment criteria which are owned by both staff and students' (2005, pp. 233-5) is the way to address students not engaging with feedback because this stance assumes that misunderstanding feedback (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004) or students only being interested in marks (Gibbs and Simpson, 2004) prevents engagement with feedback. Yet the avoidance of feedback and indicators of denial by my students suggests instead a range of survival strategies within higher education, and that a focus on summative feedback and not understanding feedback is only part of the story.

Feedback may be 'eclipsed by learners reactions', (Race, 1995, p. 67) meaning that the emotions attached to reading the feedback are so strong that they prevent the student from looking at the feedback in order to use it to improve and develop. For some students, even time was not enough to deal with the emotions of failure and dejection attached to the feedback. Wotjas (1998 in Rust *et al*., 2005, p. 234) indicated that feedback may be perceived to relate to a student's personal ability or worth as a person and poor marks can damage a student's 'self-efficacy'. For example two students in my study admitted not collecting/reading feedback. This behaviour is typically associated with a lack of engagement with feedback in the research literature (Maclellan, 2001; Winter & Dye, 2004), but in reality for my students was a survival mechanism. Survival can be seen as including the avoidance of an incident, the masking or disguising of incident, the wethering of an incident and the neutralizing of an incident (Hargreaves & Woods, 1984, p. 51).The students talk of how they manage the potentially harmful effects on their confidence negative feedback can produce by not collecting it. One student talks about avoiding *'another beating'* and the other of not wanting to *'look at it'*.

If you've already been slapped down once [written feedback comments], you're not going to go again for another beating [verbal feedback]. (Toyah, interview)

You've got to do the work, give it in, basically forget about it and then go back to it in a few months or a few weeks time [to get the feedback]. I haven't looked at it. Yeah you're meant to get it back you're meant to collect it. But I haven't been to get it back or anything. I just don't want to look at it. It's been and done. (Shireen, interview)

The self-esteem of students was often already damaged due to negative feedback and students used this strategy of avoidance to protect themselves from further-attacks on their self-esteem. As Ingleton highlights 'in learning, one works hard at minimising risk, or avoiding risk, to avoid shame and the lowering of self-esteem... uncertainty about one's ability leads people to 'self-handicap', to not do well, or not try, for example, in order to discount the effect of failure, in the service of maintaining self-esteem' (1999, p. 1). The need for students to protect their self-esteem suggests that greater attention to building student confidence and enabling them to develop more positive learner identities may have a role to play in encouraging engagement with feedback. This would enable them to view feedback more positively as a developmental tool.

Survival

Some students talked about survival at university in more general terms, using some poignant metaphors and this links back to 'being wrong', a low sense of entitlement in asking for support and a lack of care and 'permission-giving' to learn by lecturers.

You feel it is a hostile environment because lecturers just want you to get on with it… you need the tutor to actually pull you out, you need to know where the life-jacket is but I haven't used it because the life-jacket wasn't actually thrown to me. (Henry, interview)

Students only seek help when they hit the buffers. (Henry, interview)

When I've been to see the tutors when they are available they have been normally, well I don't have to say who they are, but they have been 'Yep what do you want? Well I'm busy at the moment. Well is it the time that I'm supposed to see you? Well oh yes so what is it? What

*do you want? What can I help with you?' Straight away it is defensive you know is he going to help me or shall I not bother asking the question at all? (*Henry, interview)

Henry struggled to adjust to the expectations of academia and his comments offer insight into perhaps his own experiences as well as those of other students. The emotions associated with this lack of care also demonstrate a low sense of entitlement to university support mechanisms, maybe linked to not feeling 'deserving' of this support. The quotes above suggest that if students do not feel cared for by lecturers this reinforces a low sense of entitlement for support and will then only use the lecturers as a last resort, as they try to protect their self-esteem by avoiding anything which could be perceived as being negative. These findings do not indicate that the students see their experience of learning as being in a safe space. The literature on safe learning environments (Oblinger, 2006), suggests that these are places where it is okay to make mistakes and not worry about ridicule from the teacher or peers. Feeling 'safe' then is an important pretext to enable students to learn successfully. Yet this concept of safety was not apparent in the students' experiences of feedback. For example, a student would not go and see a tutor to discuss their feedback if they had received 'negative' feedback. Anxiety and fear have their basis in situations where a person is denied acceptance or recognition (Barbalet, 1998). This led to a reduction in motivation and confidence. This finding suggests that the perceived unapproachability of staff, combined with 'being wrong' can have a real impact on students' emotional states leading to a reduction in the extent to which they will engage with learning and in this particular situation assignment feedback.

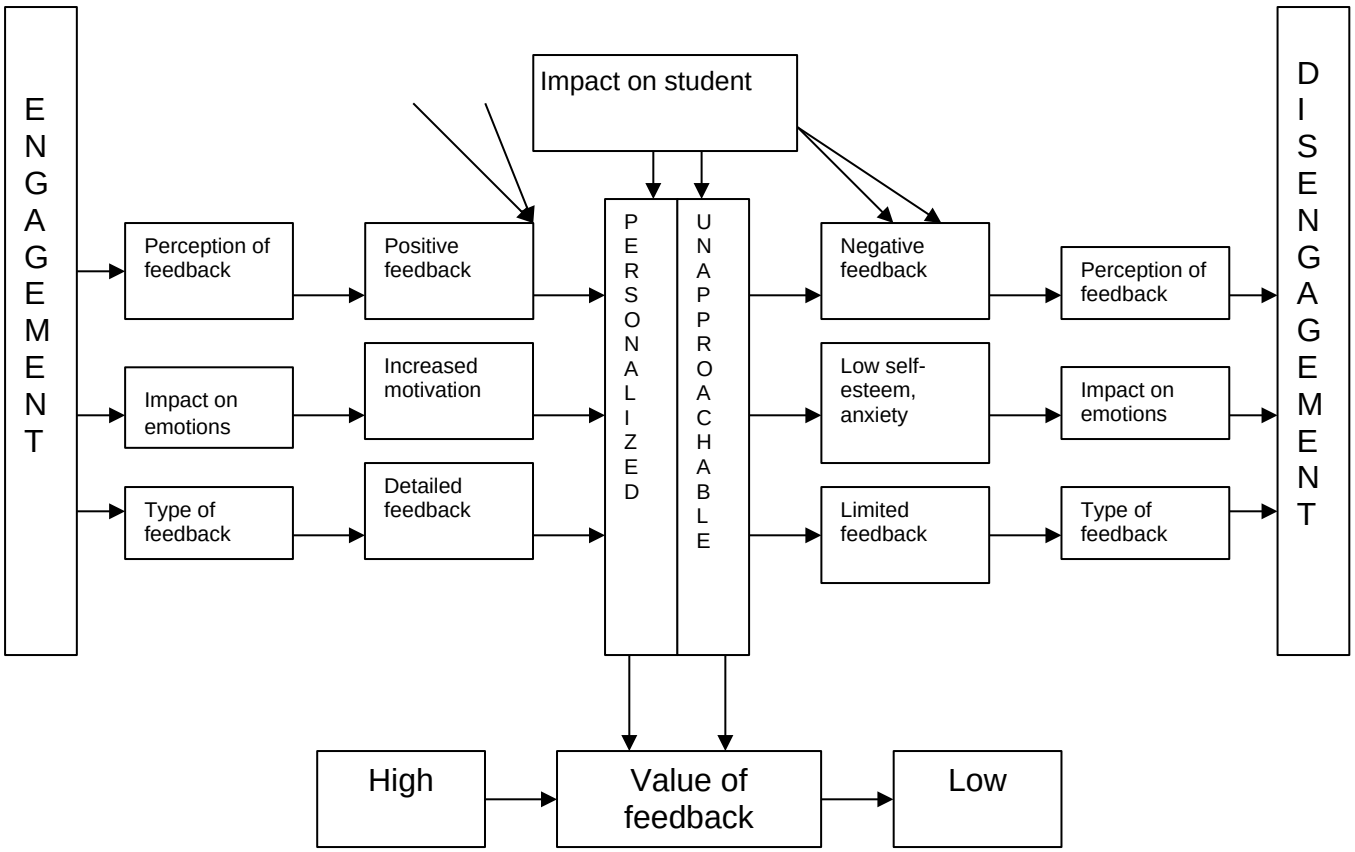
In conclusion, what is perhaps most significant is the way in which emotions influence responses to learning having both a significant role in the activity of learning and the affective outcome of learning. The feedback students received had powerful negative and positive affective effects. All learning invariably involves emotions such as anxiety and hope, however the strength of emotion students attached to their feedback has serious implications for feedback delivery. The next findings chapter – Chapter 7 will consider strategies in which to give feedback appropriately based on the role emotions play in student learning, particularly when new students enter higher education and address the research questions specifically in relation to student engagement with feedback.

Chapter 7: Findings

In the last chapter I discussed the affective impact of feedback. This findings chapter presents my analysis and interpretation of the research questions more specifically and is split into three parts. Part one discusses the initial findings and the subsequent model I developed and presented to students' for their validation. Part two is a summary of the further levels of analysis I undertook. Part three conveys the ways that the students' engagement changed as they progressed through significant phases told through their own stories and the re-developed model based on this deeper analysis. At the end of this chapter the implications of these findings for my discussion chapter are highlighted.

Initial analysis and findings

The process I went through at the first level of analysis was to read and re-read the interview transcripts. In each transcript I had noted what I felt were significant themes or phrases. This included looking across the data set for recurring themes, for patterns, and the frequency of these. The importance of positive feedback (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), the impact of negative feedback (Yorke, 2003) and issues around motivation (Dweck, 2000) and self-esteem (Young, 2000) discussed in my literature review, seemed to be evident throughout the interview data discussed in the previous chapter confirming these earlier studies. I drew up a model (model 1 below) of my initial findings by picking out the key themes (e.g. positive and negative feedback) and took this to the students I had interviewed to see to what extent they felt it was a valid representation of their views.



Model 1: Students' experiences of engaging with feedback based on my initial analysis of the findings.

My model was a tentative approach at summarising the themes that emerged from my data analysis. I acknowledged that this model was only way of interpreting the findings and that in doing so the complexity of the data could have been simplified or overstated. In the validity interviews (discussed in my research design chapter, p. 77) I explained the model as follows:

- The central section of the model indicates that lecturers play a key role in student engagement with feedback, such as, approachable lecturers encouraged students.
- The left section of the model shows the types of feedback students found useful. Positive experiences of feedback ensured that students were motivated to engage with feedback and felt confident about their ability to learn and develop.
- The right section indicates the impact of negative feedback experiences on self-esteem and or frustration in not feeling adequately supported.

The complexity of Model 1 in itself was problematic as it could not be understood without it being explained and the students did comment on its complexity. The arrows were perhaps the most confusing aspect of the model as they indicated causal links which were not there. Therefore in hindsight refinement of the model was needed, but the issues that students raised about the themes of the model (positive versus constructive feedback and opportunities for dialogue) were perhaps more significant in developing my analysis further as discussed below.

The participants in the validity interviews questioned my use of the terms positive and negative feedback within the model. They argued that the meanings behind these terms were more complex than the model suggested, for example positive feedback could be feedback that said the work was good, provided encouragement and increased motivation. Alternatively positive feedback could be feedback that was critical, but was useful in future work. Additionally the term negative feedback needed to be considered much more carefully, for example it could be critical of a student's work and dent their self-esteem. However negative feedback was also viewed as positive – if it helped students improve their work. There was a need for different terminology to clarify these different types of feedback and the students suggested 'constructive' feedback as a separate category from feedback that delivered positive comments such as 'well done' and negative comments such as 'poorly structured' and 'disappointing'.

From the original and validity interviews it appeared that students wanted feedback, which increased their self-esteem and motivation. Students described 'good' positive feedback as synonymous with praise and encouragement. They believed that only a small amount of feedback which indicated areas for development was also good just to show that they were on the 'right track'. However, they still expected specific detailed comments indicating that the marker had read their work carefully, as well as encouragement. Negative feedback (insensitive criticism) had a profound effect because it damaged self-esteem and made students not only question their legitimacy at university, but consider the impact of the personal sacrifices they were making in order to study at university.

In discussing good *engagement* with feedback, the students felt that this would occur when there was a dialogue between themselves and their tutor about the feedback on say, a draft

assignment. Although they believed dialogue with tutors was the best way to engage with the feedback they were given, very few students took steps to engage in such dialogue because they felt the lecturers were too busy and/or unapproachable. Many worked independently trying to understand and act on the feedback without support.

So far then, my initial findings confirmed issues already identified in earlier research, for example:

- Students wanted positive feedback e.g. praise and encouragement (Weaver, 2006)
- Students felt that negative feedback (insensitive criticism) damaged their self-esteem (Poulos & Mahony, 2007)
- Students expected detailed comments on their assignment as evidence that their work had been read carefully (Higgins *et al.*, 2002)

In addition they suggested that:

- Students wanted 'constructive' comments (different from positive feedback)
- Good *engagement* with feedback was about a dialogue between student and tutors
- Students appreciated approachable lecturers who would discuss their assignments and feedback
- Students tended to try to make sense of the written feedback without tutor support and dialogue

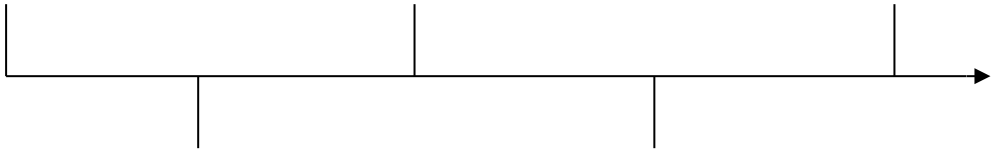
Although these findings revealed some of the issues of engaging with feedback there were still a number of outstanding questions, contradictions and gaps in my understanding. For example I could not explain why some students seemed to shift their position from one of needing positive feedback (praise and encouragement) to one in which they needed constructive feedback (for development). I returned to the interview data again to see what if anything I could glean from re-analysing the transcripts with this question in mind.

Deeper analysis and search for understanding

Critical stages in the academic year

I began to focus on shifts in students' needs for and expectations of feedback and soon realised that the timing of the interviews could be significant. The validity interviews had

been conducted much later in the students' experiences of feedback, often in their second year and I wondered if the timing of interviews impacted upon the students' responses. I had been conscious of needing to time my interviews at certain stages of the year when students had received feedback (as discussed in the research design chapter, p. 77). In addition to this I was familiar with the literature on transition to university (McInnis, 2001; Yorke & Longden, 2008) and critical incidents in the first year (Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001). I created a timeline of the students' first year and critical incidents within that timeframe (highlighted on Model 2). These critical incidents were: starting university, receiving feedback on their first assignment, the end of semester 1/start of semester 2, receiving feedback on semester 2 assignments and the end of the first year/start of the second year. I then looked at each participant's interview at these critical times to see how / if the way they talked about feedback changed:



Model 2: A timeline of critical incidents within the first year at university with interview quotes from Zahara (her feelings about feedback shifted showing she progressed through ‘critical feedback incidents’ in her first year.)

I decided to categorise the interview transcripts into when they had been conducted, for example I identified the themes and patterns that emerged, such as feeling reassured by positive feedback from interviews after the first semester of the first year. I then compared these themes with interviews that were conducted later, such as feeling annoyed by feedback that did not explain how to make improvements. By dividing the data sets into these two categories I was able to see a difference in the themes. For example, students who were receiving their first assignment feedback were looking for positive feedback (praise and

encouragement) and then later on in the year they were focusing on constructive feedback which would enable them to improve. This was reinforced by the students I interviewed twice (validity interviews), as a comparison of their transcripts also showed this shift from wanting positive feedback to constructive feedback. This shift in expectations and needs appeared to be a general trend as it explained to some extent why some students resented receiving just positive feedback (praise and encouragement) later in the year, which they could not use to improve. But it did not explain why some students continued to need just positive feedback even later on in the year.

I looked again at my initial model (model 1). I had included 'impact on student', but had not explored this fully. I went back to the interview transcripts to see if there was anything in the lives and backgrounds of the students (as discussed in the previous findings chapter) that could explain the variation in the ways feedback impacted on them. I also returned to the literature to see what explanations other research might offer.

Learner identity

The literature on widening participation and the research on learner identity and 'non-traditional' students' transitions to university (Bowl 2001, Crozier *et al*. 2008) seemed particularly relevant given the profile of students in my study. Learner identity can be defined as*:*

> *'the ways in which adults come to understand the conditions under which they experience learning as facilitating or inhibiting, constructive or destructive. Learner identity suggests the emergence or affirmation of values and beliefs about learning, schooling and knowledge. The construct incorporates personal, social, sociological, experiential and intellectual dimensions of learning over time.'* (Weil, 1986, p. 223).

Bowl's (2001) study explored the transition to university from the perspective of 'non-traditional' students. Her research indicated that family situation, educational experiences and financial pressures had an impact on her participants' experiences of higher education. The participants in Bowl's study had a common aim in studying at university, hoping for a 'better life' after becoming graduates. The Crozier *et al.,* (2008) study explored working class and middle class students' learner identities in four different higher education institutions

including an elite red brick university and a post-1992 university. The working class students attending the post-1992 university viewed their acceptance at university as serendipitous. For the participants' of both of these studies a combination of academic and personal issues appeared to shape their identities as learners, which could be described as 'fragile' (Gallacher *et al.,* 2002, p.43). In other words, they entered university lacking confidence in their academic capability and this was influenced by prior negative experiences of education. These students with fragile learner identities in many ways reflected the identities of participants in my own study.

The students in my study generally came from families unfamiliar with higher education, with twenty out of twenty-four interview participants being the first person in their immediate family to attend university. They described their prior experiences of education as negative and unsuccessful. They lacked confidence in their academic capability. Many of them who lacked self confidence, described being accepted at university as a troubling journey, and talked about struggling through academic and/or personal difficulties to achieve their goal. Although proud at being offered a place at university, many of the students did not view themselves as successful and like Crozier *et al's.,* working-class students, they viewed their offer of a place at university as 'luck'. They also anticipated the need for a high level of tutor support. By comparison the middle class students in the Crozier *et al.,* (2008) study felt a strong sense of entitlement for going to university. These students had a positive prior experience of education and believed their past academic success indicated to them their capability to achieve at university-level. The participants in my study did not fully resonate with the characteristics of a strong learner identity. However, some had enjoyed school and had done relatively well academically in spite of 'family issues'.

So my second level of analysis involved first, identifying in each case aspects of learner identity (prior experiences of education, type of qualifications previously studied, family experiences and attitudes towards education, confidence and self-belief) that appeared to influence the nature and extent of students' engagement with feedback. The next stage was to look for evidence of any change in the students' feedback needs in relation to the timeline. The third stage was to consider the extent to which feedback needs had been satisfied and the impact of that on their conceptions of and engagement with feedback. In the following section I present the findings from this process of analysis and synthesis.

Final analysis – towards a model of student engagement with feedback

What emerged from this final level of analysis and interpretation was a picture of feedback needs and expectations (influenced by learner identity and critical moments in the first year), the extent to which these had been satisfied (a match or mismatch between the student's feedback needs and expectations and the type and quality of feedback given by the tutor), and the impact this feedback had on the student's conceptions of themselves as learners (e.g. reinforcing or challenging previously held learner identities) and on their actions in response to it (e.g. continuing to seek praise, taking steps to seek dialogue, etc). The model is divided into three phases: the need for students to know a) they are capable of doing a university course (confirmation of learner identity); b) the need for information about how they can improve and develop (improvement feedback – enabling attempts to improve aspects of their assignments having now received confirmation of their learner identity); c) the need for feedback that will be of use to them in their future (future oriented feedback - to improve grades and ensure a good degree classification which in turn would increase graduate career opportunities). As discussed further on page. 130 the purpose of feedback was perceived as having a longer term agenda in terms of employability, linked to a notion of transferability. Therefore, in many ways phases b and c are closely interlinked as they both concern feedback that looks to the future, in terms of the transferability of comments to improve the next assignment and transferability of comments for employability. Consequently the model can be described as having two parts to the feedback process – firstly, that of feedback for confirmation and secondly, for that of transferability. However to distinguish between the different aspects of the feedback being transferable the model is described as having three phases. Whilst there was some evidence that students moved from type a need to type c, I am not suggesting that this was a smooth path or that all students moved up through what appeared to be a hierarchy of feedback needs. Nevertheless it did seem as though students wanted their feedback needs satisfied before they could engage at a deeper level. In the next section I outline these three needs as stages that students go through and illustrate with quotes from the interviews how the feedback students received satisfies their needs and enables them to move on.

Need for feedback as confirmation of learner identity

In light of the academic and personal investment students were taking in studying at university, it is perhaps of no surprise that the feedback from their first assignments was critical to them. Students were looking for evidence to confirm or not their decision to attend university as being the 'right one' by validating themselves as 'capable learners' and were using their feedback as a 'sign' to do this. Positive feedback confirmed their decision to study at university as being the right personal choice. It had a significant impact on their learner identity as they started to believe that they had the capability to study at university level and that they could be successful learners.

I was very happy with feedback because most of it was positive anyway (laughter). Because it had been my first essay since I had been in university and I was quite nervous about it and thinking 'oh dear' do I really know what I am supposed to be doing. A lot of questions at the back of your mind, but the way it came back it was like positive and it made me more confident and told me the areas which I was weak and the areas which I was strong in. So it was very informative. (Gillian, interview)

Gillian is a female, Black African, 30 year old student. She moved to Britain from Africa several years ago with her husband and two children. She had not had many educational opportunities in Africa due to having a young family. Gillian and her family were very happy living in the UK. She had studied a number of courses, such as ICT and GCSEs before embarking on an Access Course. She was very concerned about receiving her feedback promptly because she wanted to ensure that her work would be of a good standard so that she would have a successful studying experience at university.

Feedback which only included minor criticisms was also viewed positively in this early phase. This confirmed to students that they did not need to significantly improve to be at the 'correct standard', and indicated their capability of being able to cope with studying at university.

I got a bit of encouragement as well like you're on the right lines... you know what I mean so I was very happy with it with the feedback that I got. (John, interview)

The findings suggest that many students wanted the feedback from the first assignment to confirm their decision to attend university and to validate their academic 'right' to be there.

In response to my research question 'What is the student perspective on feedback?' at this early stage it is about the feedback confirming to the students' that they are clever enough and capable to study at university. Positive feedback (praise and encouragement) with only minor criticisms appeared to be all that some students required in the early stages of the first year experience. On the other hand, 'negative' feedback (insensitive criticism) on the first assignment had a profound effect on students because it made them question their legitimacy as learners at university. The students suffered a huge knock to their self-esteem and questioned their decision to study at university.

Negative feedback and clumsy criticism mean we become struck by the belief that we're wasting our time, the "Why bother?" mentality becoming draining and pervasive. (Nina, reflective writing)

Ecclestone (2007) found in her study of further education students that less confident students who regularly received low grades did not believe that formative feedback could help them improve. Approximately one third of students in her study said they did not believe they could improve their work despite their best efforts. As many of the students in my study also came to university with a similar lack of confidence as the students in Ecclestone's (2007) study, I began to question whether formative feedback on the first assignment is as valuable to students, as simple quick positive reinforcement that confirmed their capability to succeed and improve.

All the students in my study who had received negative feedback on their first assignments decided to continue with their course. They had received set-backs before and had become accustomed to dealing with difficulties. They had been determined to gain a place at university and were now focused on getting a degree to gain graduate employment. So although they used feedback as a sign to confirm their academic capabilities, it was also apparent that when the students received feedback that did not confirm this, they nevertheless had the emotional intelligence and resilience to persist (Qualter *et al*., 2009). This response can be likened to the 'get in and stay in' mentality of the working class students in Crozier *et al*., (2008) study. A lack of success at school can often be an incentive for later study (Gorard & Rees, 2002). Despite the fact these students' may not have been confident learners; it did not mean that they did not have a strong disposition to learn (Gorard & Rees, 2002). This determination saw them through this phase of their transition to university which many

described as a ‘survival’. For some, not receiving the confirmation they needed, meant lowering their expectations of what they might achieve, such as ‘just passing’. It also affected their longer-term responses to feedback, such as in the second phase of ‘improvement and development’, as discussed in the next section.

Need for improvement and development feedback

Once feedback had satisfied their need to know that they were in the ‘right place’ and academically capable of succeeding at university, students seemed to develop the need for feedback to do more to help them improve and develop. It was much easier emotionally for the students who had received ‘positive feedback’ to start the process of using feedback to improve and develop because the positive feedback had given a boost to their self-esteem and identity as learners.

I got a ‘well done’ or ‘good writing’ or ‘good paragraphing’ and I feel so happy about that because I got a lot of achievement from my module and I’m okay I just have to improve this part. (Alex, interview)

As the students received an increasing amount of feedback from different assignments, they realised that they could use the feedback in different assignment contexts and build up their skills through continuing to improve using the feedback they had received.

I think it builds on it. You take certain things from year one if you like and you keep those things and then in the second year again you take certain elements from the feedback so you are building up all the time the feedback, particularly the technical side of things like what the lecturers are looking for, critical analysis that sort of thing. The feedback you receive will help towards other modules is what I suppose I’m trying to say. So even if you don’t take all the feedback on board on a particular module because you are building on the feedback and can remember certain things from each assignment that you get back so it does help. (Stefan, interview)

Students also explained the process that they went through to ensure that they had engaged with the feedback. This process was often methodical and the feedback was often used as a to-do list.

I made sure I'd done everything so I ticked everything, so If I hadn't done it I'd make sure I looked it up and tried to address it because I think if it is given to you there then you know you should address it you should because at the end of the day you are going to suffer if you don't. (Helen, interview)

For the students who had received negative feedback in the first phase, they often characterised difficulties in engaging with the feedback as a failing on their part, rather than as a problem with the feedback. Students often applied a deficit model to their own ability to learn, believing they did not have the ability to utilise the feedback.

Further depth is a little bit vague and I'm not exactly the brightest spark… I can analyse something, but critically analysing something is a bit of a different story because it is slightly different. So applying that was very difficult to do. (Scott, interview)

The students emphasised how 'bad' experiences of feedback prevented further learning and improvement because of the emotional impact it had on students. Students described how negative feedback (insensitive criticism) affected their self-esteem and lowered their levels of motivation to engage with feedback.

I know from personal experience that not only is it very soul destroying but it also makes a student doubt their ability to write, thus resulting in a worse essay. (Adida, reflective writing)

Using feedback to improve and develop was difficult for students who had to overcome negative emotions which emerged when reading their feedback.

Need for future orientated feedback – becoming 'critical consumers' of feedback

For the students who had attempted to engage with feedback to improve and develop, they moved into a third phase of engaging with feedback. They became increasingly 'expert' on what constituted good and bad feedback. The students had moved from using feedback to improve and develop to now being critical consumers of feedback, for example they anticipated that engaging with the feedback would lead to achieving higher grades. This is perhaps not surprising as a culture which increasingly sees students as customers, combined with a competitive job market puts students under considerable pressure to achieve good grades. The marketisation of education can be seen to have led to the emergence of

'consumer citizens' who believe they have the right to receive a good quality service because they have a contractual relationship with the service provider (Oliver & Heater, 1994) and receiving feedback from lecturers is one example of this. The students in my study often commented on the cost of the tuition and compared this to their learning and teaching experience. The students could not 'see' where their tuition fees were going except to pay the wages of lecturers who often did not help them or give them the feedback that they wanted. The students in my study appeared to want feedback because as consumers they were 'owed' it.

As the students focus turned to using feedback to improve their grades, they became increasingly frustrated when the feedback did not provide opportunities to support this process. The students now became disappointed in their feedback as they did not feel it provided enough information to help them improve. There are two issues here, firstly students are unhappy with the quality of the feedback and secondly this is exacerbated by the students having greater 'demands' of their feedback at this later stage.

For example where it was saying your abstract had to be condensed. It wasn't saying your abstract was good; however try to shorten it next time. You know just putting down it needs to be condensed doesn't tell me if it was good enough or not. (Veena, interview)

They just put a star by the work that you do and it's like well what are you meant to do and it's like how can you improve it? (Parmjit, interview)

This stage of becoming 'critical consumers' was tied to the students' ongoing focus on the academic aspects of university. The students' identity as learners meant that in many cases they wanted to get good grades because a good degree would improve their employment prospects.

The students were also concerned about the lack of constructive feedback had for their future careers as graduates. The purpose of feedback was perceived as having a longer term agenda in terms of employability after finishing their degrees, again this was linked to the students' identities as learners and their focus on university as a stepping stone to a 'better life'. Although the interview questions did not specifically ask about feedback and employability, the link was made directly by six of the interviewees, with the other 18 making an indirect

link through discussing their career plans. So when considering my research question 'What meanings and purposes do students' attach to feedback?' it is apparent that the purpose of feedback went beyond the immediate context of the assignment. This is an example of how students see feedback as having long-term potential rather than about immediate action in which to support learning.

I think it is quite important because I think like if you can have feedback you know how to take criticism and throughout work you are going to get it. So if you can't take it now you're never going to take it. (Helen, interview)

As I wish to be an author any feedback on my writing is valuable to me. (Dean, interview)

This indicates the student focus on employability during their undergraduate studies and how they want their degrees to focus on elements related to employability. This is perhaps not surprising as the background information about the interview participants indicated in many cases that the students believed the employment opportunities that would be available to them as graduates were favourable, in contrast to the examples they cited of their own families experiencing unemployment and low incomes.

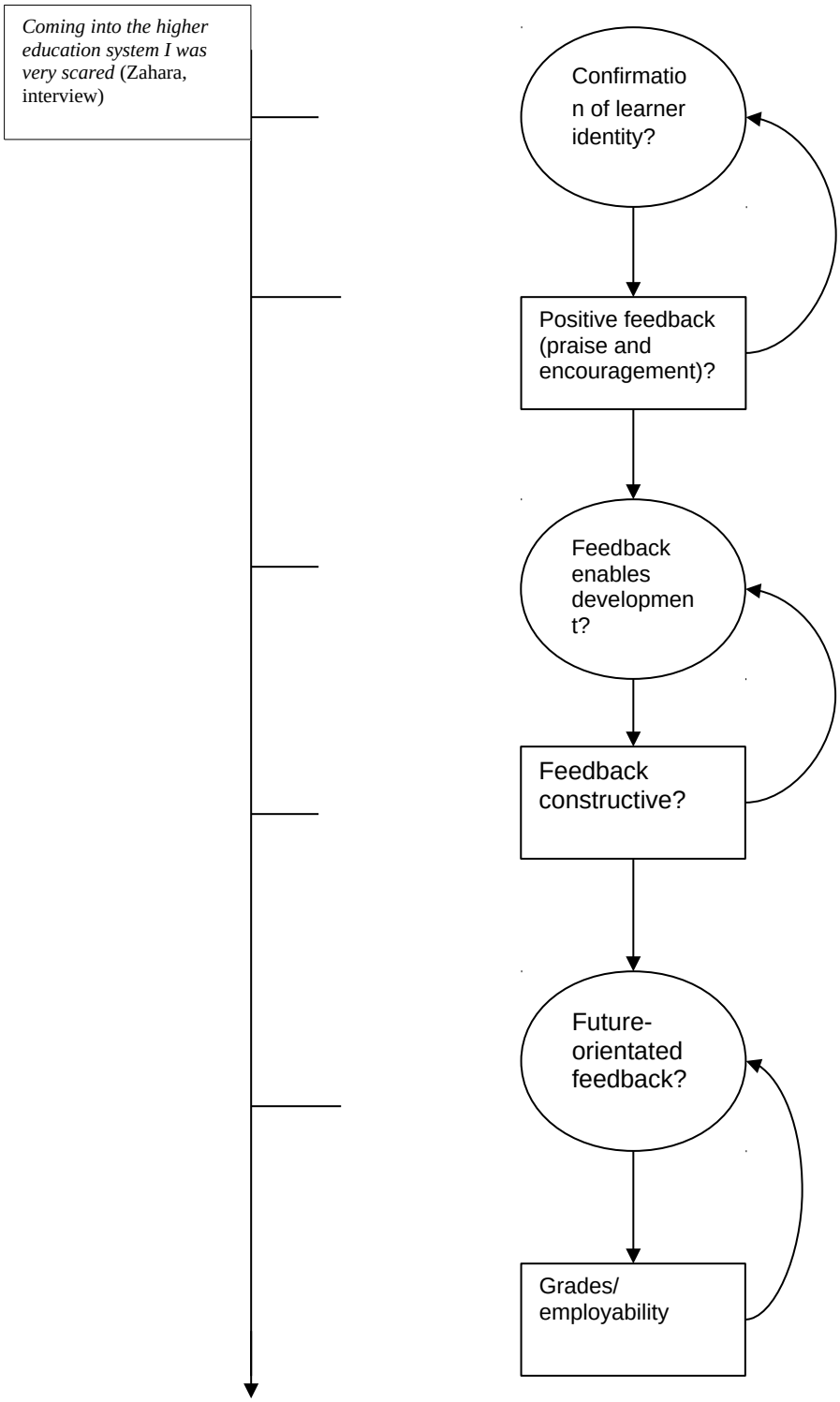
When you are out there working I presume it's not strictly academic so it would help if the feedback was maybe after the whole course more personal or softened so to speak not to be too academic... so when you go into the field you know what it is you're bringing. (Gillian, interview)

Employability, as a significant agenda for the students in my study, is supported by the work of Marr and Leach (2005), who found that their Sociology students, (with a very similar demographic profile to the students at Newcity University) were concerned about the lack of constructive skills the academic subject of Sociology offered. They developed a new module which essentially was a work placement in which students were able to apply sociological concepts or theories. Marr and Leach (2005) indicated that obtaining graduate employment is often foremost on students' minds. For the students in my study this was demonstrated in their expectations of feedback being linked to employability in non-work related modules.

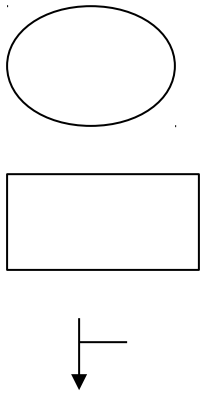
The students had also now started to take strategic action to avoid poor quality feedback, for example choosing modules based on lecturers who would provide constructive feedback, rather than modules that interested them.

The feedback on the test was absolutely useless. I asked her whether she could give me any advice and all she said "No, not really"… the end of the story is that in order to avoid her modules I will do a 30-credit project and five modules in semester one and three in semester two! (Yvonne, interview)

Students' began to choose modules based on the type and quality of feedback they believed particular lecturers would provide. In some ways their behaviour could be likened to customers choosing their modules based on the feedback attributes which they believed would most likely meet their requirements. To summarise at this phase of engaging with feedback, students wanted feedback that would enable them to improve their grades and also reflected a broader agenda of future employability. I now took into consideration this phase of becoming a 'critical consumer' with the two early phases of 'confirming a strong learner identity' and 'using feedback to improve' to develop a model based on my interpretation of the findings.


Coming into the higher education system I was very scared (Zahara, interview)
Confirmatio n of learner identity?
Positive feedback (praise and encouragement)?
Feedback enables developmen t?
Feedback constructive?
Future-orientated feedback?
Grades/ employability

Key



Model 3: Students' experiences of engaging with feedback influenced by their learner identity and timing of feedback

Commentary on model 3

Model 3 aims to help practitioners reconsider the types of feedback that are suitable for first year students as they navigate the transition to learning in higher education. The timeline and process flow diagram can be seen as complementing each other. The student starts their first day at university (as indicated on the timeline) with a range of needs and concerns about their academic capabilities which include feedback (flow diagram). When the student receives their first assignment feedback (timeline), this coincides with confirming (or not) a strong learner identity, depending on if the feedback had a positive impact on the student. Regardless of whether this is confirmed the university year moves forward and they finish their first semester (timeline). As the second semester starts (timeline), again the student is presented with assignments and assignment feedback (timeline). Some students may still be waiting for positive feedback so that they can start to engage (see chapter 6 for a discussion of liminality and 'stuck places') and for others they will begin to focus on how to develop their assignments (flow diagram) using their feedback. Constructive feedback, as highlighted by students' in the validity interviews is required by students to enable them to develop. As the first year draws to a close (timeline), the students who have been focusing on development (flow diagram) now become much more strategic, thinking about improving their grades and about their future employability, as critical consumers. Other students may still be waiting to confirm a learner identity or attempting to use feedback to improve at the end of the first year.

This model is just one way of representing the way students' engage with feedback. It is problematic by its very nature, people do not fit nicely into categories or models and each individual may move through this process in an entirely different way, or equally their experience of engaging with feedback may be completely different to the model I have developed. This model is very much a tentative representation based on my interpretation of the data, which needs much greater testing. One of the main weaknesses of this model is that due to my timing of writing up this section of my findings, I have been unable to ask for student validation of this model, so the extent to which it represents the student 'voice' can be questioned. However, I have used the student voice through their interview transcripts to give an indication of how a student may move through these phases.

Arvind

The two 'pen-pictures' below demonstrate how different students moved through the phases of engaging with feedback, that I highlighted in model 3. Each pen picture highlights the expectations and needs of students' moving through each phase: confirmation of learner identity, feedback enabling improvement and future-orientated feedback. The way in which students moved through these phases was influenced by their interpretation of the teachers feedback, for example if the feedback was positive (praise and encouragement), if the feedback was constructive or if it provided information about improving grades or information relevant for employability.

Arvind was a mature student who started her course optimistically, believing that she was more than capable of studying at university.

I loved school. My GCSE's came out not too bad actually… I mean with my A levels I got 2 B's and a C.

Confirmation of learner identity

Having received the feedback from her first assignment, she was in total shock as to how she had done so poorly, as she had never experienced this type of 'failure' before. She felt that the feedback did not contain any positive elements.

The first time I saw the grade and the feedback from the marker my confidence level was so low I thought how I'm going to get through this? It really knocked me because I was thinking you know how did this happen? To tell you the truth the feedback on this assignment was not positive at all I don't think there were any positive comments.

This was a huge dent to her self-esteem and confidence and made her question her decision to leave a full-time job. However, having a supportive family and knowing from her past educational experiences that she was capable of doing well meant that she began to think proactively about how she could improve and develop.

Improvement and development

She reflected: *I knew I wasn't going to come out with A's straight away…I knew I wanted to be able to improve on [my performance] and need to know what to do in order to go forward.*

Arvind hired a private tutor to gain the support she needed. She became focused on how to improve and develop further and did start to see an improvement in her assignments.

Future orientated

The improvement in her grades saw a greater use of positive feedback, but she felt that this was not now necessary (unlike for her first assignment).

Yes the feedback is positive, but useful – no. It does not tell me how to get from a B to an A

She concluded that she was:

…here to have a career and not to mess about, that's the reason why really I wanted to know my grades and wanted to know what I can do to improve then

Therefore Arvind viewed the feedback in an instrumental manner at this stage focusing on grades and employability prospects.

Josie

Unlike Arvind, Josie started her course with a low level of confidence in her academic ability, which had been reinforced by her parents and from finding school difficult.

I hated it, it was absolutely horrible [school]. I left school when I was 16, much to my parent's annoyance and then they kind of gave up on me.

Confirmation of learner identity

Positive feedback was paramount for Josie because of her prior experiences of school and the attitude of her parents.

I handed in an assignment this semester and he'd wrote on it 'good, well done' I'd got a B…I need to be reassured that I'm doing the right thing or going in the right direction if I don't get help I feel really lost, I feel really overwhelmed.

This positive feedback gave Josie enough confidence to start and improve her assignments.

Improvement and development

Although Josie wanted to improve, this became problematic as she had no outlet to discuss her feedback as the students were not encouraged to talk about their feedback with the tutors.

I don't think we are allowed to we're not meant to [talk to the lecturers] and I couldn't just see her in the building. The third floor is blocked off and you have to get a code and that's where all the professors are, you can't get in anyway even if you want to.

Therefore with no outlet to discuss the feedback to attempt to improve she was unable to move forward to enhance her learning fully. Josie relied on her own attempts to improve and develop her work.

When I'm writing my essay this semester I looked back at the comments on the ones last year.

Future orientated

Josie became critical of feedback of feedback that did not help her improve her grades, as she saw this as having a detrimental impact on her future career opportunities.

I don't want to go necessarily into being a Lawyer, barrister or solicitor, but that's the type of thing I want to do…I need high grades to get into that and sometimes the feedback does not help me to improve enough to get those grades.

Summary of findings chapter

The findings represent the story of the students' experiences of feedback as moving through three phases: validating their decision to study at university, using feedback to improve and develop and finally as critical consumers of feedback and these phases are tied up with their identities as learners and the timing of feedback. The final model developed is based on

students' movement through these phases. The findings chapter raises some interesting points about dialogue, power relations and employability. These will be explored further in the discussion chapter through my final research question: 'What are the implications for lecturers and students, policy and practice in the university sector?'

Discussion: Chapter 8

In the previous chapters (6 and 7-Findings) I identified three phases of feedback engagement that correspond to the needs and expectations students have at particular critical moments in their first year at university. These phases are 'confirmation of learner identity', 'improvement' and 'future-orientated feedback'. In this chapter I first examine the ways the affective impact and these three aspects of feedback engagement help address my original research questions. In the second part of the chapter I focus on my last research sub-question 3a 'what are the implications for students, staff, policy and practice across the university sector?' In particular this section considers the role of feedback- dialogues and peer feedback as strategies for enhancing learning.

Addressing the research questions

In this section I return to my original research questions and summarise the ways in which my findings address each question. I will focus on the three main research questions and incorporate the sub-questions into the discussion.

1. What is the student perspective on feedback?

I wanted to know what students felt about feedback because the studies I had looked at often took a teacher/institutional perspective (Weaver, 2006; Chanock, 2000). I conjectured that until we knew how students perceived feedback and what they wanted from it, we would not know how to get them engaged with it. So my first objective was to understand from the student perspective what feedback meant to them. The student perspective on feedback changed as students moved through each phase: confirmation of learner identity, improvement and future-orientated feedback because their feedback needs shifted as they progressed through the academic year.

This was highlighted by the different meanings and purposes students' attached to their feedback at different stages of their first year. The data suggests that the students see feedback in different ways, for example as a sign, as a way of improving, as a dialogue and as a way of preparing for careers. These views were not fixed, but changed according to their stage of transition at university. The student transition to university has been researched

(McInnis, 2001; Yorke & Longden, 2008) and the factors that influence this, for example learner identity, choice of university and/or subject, family background and financial situation. However, the type of feedback students want depending on their phase of transition to university has not been previously discussed. The meanings and purposes students attached to feedback were influenced by the different stages they moved through.

Meanings

Initially students looked to the feedback on their first assignment as a sign that they were up to the academic standards expected at university and as evidence confirming their 'learner identities' whether weak or strong. Feedback that was good or better than they expected enabled students to build stronger learner identities and helped those who were otherwise tentative about their place in university to feel a sense of 'belonging'. This experience can be described as the students moving from their liminal space to entering student-hood based on positive feedback from a 'significant other' – the lecturer. Better than expected or 'positive' feedback at this early stage of their university life was feedback that simply praised or encouraged the student without too much detailed information of where they went wrong. A good grade and few encouraging words was often sufficient to satisfy this need for reassurance at this stage. In Crossan *et al's.,* (2003) study of 'non-traditional' learners, students were often initially tentative about engaging in this process of formal learning. Their previous learning experiences had given them little confidence and their engagement with feedback slowly developed over time. Students in my study who had received 'negative' feedback (i.e. feedback that confirmed their weak learner identity such as a low grade and / or comments that focused on what was wrong with the work with little or no encouraging words) were often 'stuck', still waiting to receive positive feedback before they could move on to see feedback as a constructive tool for development.

Purposes

For students who had received positive feedback in the early phase of 'confirming learner identity' then the meanings and purposes they attached to feedback adjusted accordingly. At this stage of trying to develop, the purpose of feedback was about enabling them to improve. This can be related to Sadler's (1989) seminal model of engaging with feedback which focuses on trying to close the gap between actual and desired performance. Essentially, for the students in my study this developmental phase was also about improving further to meet academic criteria and standards, such as referencing correctly and structuring essays. The

final phase saw students' associating feedback with future-orientated needs. Now the purpose of feedback was to ensure good assignment grades and consider their strengths and weaknesses for future careers and employability. Students were now more openly critical of feedback and became frustrated when it did not help them in the ways they needed, this was also reflected in what students viewed as 'good' feedback.

The concept of 'good' feedback shifted as students moved through the first year. What was characterised as good feedback (that is positive feedback, such as praise and encouragement) on a student's first assignment was certainly not what was viewed as 'good' feedback on their later assignment. As students started to feel confident enough to engage with feedback, they viewed 'good' feedback as feedback that was constructive in enabling them to develop. In the last phase of engaging with feedback, students believed 'good' feedback enabled them to improve grades and prepare them for careers.

2. **What does *engaging* with feedback mean to students?**

Whilst the students in the study had articulated clear ideas about the meaning and purposes of feedback in their early phase of transition to university, they were less clear about what constituted engagement with feedback at this stage. Engaging with feedback, and students conceptualisation of it, came after they had received positive feedback (praise and encouragement) confirming their learner identity. The need for positive feedback (praise and encouragement) which motivates students is supported by Sadler (1998, p.84) who calls for feedback's 'catalytic coaching value and its ability to inspire confidence and hope' to be considered when tutors give feedback to students. After receiving positive feedback (praise and encouragement) they were then able to start using feedback to improve. However, the concept of engaging with feedback and the behaviours involved in engaging with feedback were different.

Concept of engaging with feedback

For many of the students the concept of engaging with feedback was about talking to staff about their feedback in a one-to-one tutorial discussion. However, very few students took up this opportunity as they were reluctant to approach lecturers who they believed to be busy and unapproachable. The form of engagement with feedback that students felt was most effective involved dialogue with a tutor (see also Crozier *et al.*, 2008; Thomas, 2002). My participants welcomed approachable lecturers who made time to discuss feedback and

'inspire confidence' (Sadler, 1998, p. 84). As other studies have found (e.g. Thomas 2002) students report improvements in their work, growth in confidence and an increase in motivation when tutors, who they feel believe in them and care about the outcomes of their study, engaged with them in dialogue about their work. However, this form of engagement cannot be done independently of the tutor. It requires an additional layer of feedback (usually verbal and often face to face) at an individual or small group level increasing the demand on a tutor's time. This is an onerous demand, especially in post-1992 universities where the student to staff ratios are typically high. Tutors who do provide this support usually do so at a cost to themselves. University teachers in a post-1992 institution (Hockings *et al*., (2009) discussed the dilemma of wanting to give more feedback to students, but how time-pressures and large cohorts of students meant this was increasingly difficult.

Understandably, many tutors feel unable and appear unwilling to provide this additional level of feedback, consequently, students feel unable to ask for it. So whilst students may want to engage with feedback in this way, the resourcing model for mass higher education does not allow for all students to get it. High demand for scarce resources inevitably increases competition. Those students who have the confidence to ask for tutor dialogue are more likely to get it than those less confident (and perhaps in greater need) do not. This difference was particularly noticeable between younger and mature students. Younger students were more in awe of lecturers and less likely to take the initiative to approach them, in comparison to mature students who found them more accommodating. This difference was also apparent between students with different aims. Students who were aiming for a first class degree and who had already attained high grades were much more confident to ask for discussion on their feedback with their tutors, than students whose aims or expectations were lower. Perhaps the ones that would have benefited most, such as students still needing positive feedback to confirm their learner identity, were the least likely to approach lecturers. On the whole, so long as a student's grade and feedback comments matched or exceeded their needs and expectations, the majority of students did not persist in seeking dialogue although they may have felt this was the best form of engagement with feedback.

For those students who did seek dialogue with tutors there was some variation in the *type* of dialogue different students wanted. Some described tutorials about their work as a verbal transmission of information. The lecturer took the lead in shaping the exchange based on their interpretation of the strengths and weaknesses of the work in question. This placed the

lecturer in a position of authority and knowledge as 'expert', controlling 'how' and 'when' students could speak, question and seek clarification. Some students were happy for lecturers to be in control as they were used to passive acceptance of the teachers knowledge and authority and it often provided them with a template or strategy for what a particular lecturer required for them to achieve the desired grade. For other students tutorials conducted in this way were frustrating because they were unable to have a 'real dialogue' that might involve questioning and challenging the tutor at a deeper level than at the surface level of the immediate assignment. The consequence of this process of transmission could lead to students' lacking confidence in the importance and usefulness of their own ideas or opinions (Lea & Street, 1998).

Yet, this is not to say that pedagogical changes cannot be implemented, particularly, for example within a seminar setting. When students (and teachers) think about dialogue, they often consider the one-to-one tutorial system, and as discussed above this is not always a feasible approach. However a dialogue can be generated within the classroom which facilitates formative feedback practices. For example, when teachers carefully consider the questions that they ask and give students sufficient time to answer, this gives the teacher a clearer sense of student understanding, whilst giving students the opportunity to be actively involved in making sense of information. Nevertheless, this may require a shift for some students and teachers in expectations and roles as students are required to become active learners and it is no longer sufficient for teachers to merely transmit information. In addition, seminars are an ideal setting in which students are able to focus on criteria through discussing exemplars and for them to assess the work of their peers enabling a clearer understanding of criteria and expectations. These are all opportunities for dialogue which can improve student engagement with learning, requiring more of a shift in expectations and roles, rather than a consideration of resourcing.

The behaviour of engaging with feedback

When students described the actual process they went through to engage with feedback, their behaviour indicated a series of stages that they worked through independently (without a verbal discussion with their lecturer), rather than the collaborative discussion they envisaged conceptually. This process of engaging with feedback involved a series of stages. The first stage was reading, the second stage was trying to understand the meaning of the feedback or

the action they needed to take and the third stage was actually attempting to respond to the feedback. The behaviours students described in attempting to respond to the feedback were:

- Making a list of changes or ‘things to ‘do’ for the next assignment
- Going to the library to find a study-skills book
- Making an appointment with a study-skills adviser
- Emailing a lecturer to ask a question about their next assignment (in reference to the feedback that they had received), for example if their feedback had said ‘you need to use more references’, they may email ‘how many references do I need?
- Getting a friend/family member to proof read their assignment to see if they had addressed the issues raised by their last set of feedback.

The students couched their stages with words such as ‘try’ and ‘attempt’. This suggests that it is not always straightforward to engage with feedback in the sense of taking action. Additionally, the behaviours described in engaging with feedback did not happen as soon as the students had received their feedback. For example, students often waited until they were writing assignments for semester two before attempting to use the feedback they had received in semester one. Therefore this process of engagement was spread out over a period of time, such as reading the feedback after initially receiving it, but not then starting to try to use it until a much later date.

The delay in attempting to use the feedback may explain why although conceptually students would have liked to discuss their feedback, in reality they did not want to have this conversation until much later in the year when they were doing their next assignment. After this lapse of time it may not have seemed appropriate to students to query lecturer feedback they had received several months before. This delay in using feedback also calls into question the type of feedback being given to students. If students are not using it until much later in the year then the guidance provided needs to be understandable and transferable to another assignment after a lapse of time. The way students described their process of engaging with

feedback reflects the structure of when students complete university assignments. It seems that if students had assignments spaced closer together it would encourage a more immediate response to feedback because they would have more frequent opportunities to use the feedback comments being given. However, as discussed previously the time-constraints on lecturers may make more frequent tutor-led feedback difficult to implement.

The student behaviour in responding to feedback in the last stage – future orientated feedback, seemed to go to one of two ways. Some students became very pro-active and would go to discuss their feedback with tutors and ask their tutors to give feedback on drafts and these students were very focused on achieving very high grades in their assignments. Yet, other students seemed to respond in the opposite way. These students made less attempts to engage with feedback than previously and were happy to 'get by' and expressed 'it's good enough' responses to assignments. They often characterised their experience at university as having been about survival and just wanted to get their degree, seeing it as a stepping-stone to their future. This suggests that the type of feedback students received in their early phase of transition and at the improvement phase had longer term implications for how students engaged with feedback throughout their time at university. For example students who did not receive positive feedback (praise and encouragement) when they started university, took much longer to reach the improvement stage and this disillusionment may have led to less motivation to continue to engage with feedback.

3. What are the factors that promote/prevent engagement with feedback?

Promoting engagement with feedback

In order for students to engage with feedback effectively and at the earliest stage in their first year, the conditions for promoting engagement had to be in place. These were:

- First assignments should be small and not too much emphasis should be placed on them.

By making first assignments less important (low stakes) it reduces pressure on students. If students do not do as well as they hoped, it will not count significantly towards their overall mark and give them further opportunities to improve.

The significance of the first assignments students complete at university has been discussed by Yorke & Thomas (2003). Low stakes assignments mean firstly students can be guided into

the expectations of higher education and secondly it removes the burden of ‘failure’ in this early transitional phase.

- Feedback should focus on developing student confidence through praise and encouragement.

As noted previously many of the students lacked confidence in their own capabilities at university and praise and encouragement were needed in feedback to reassure students about their academic capabilities. My study has shown the longer term implications of students not receiving praise and encouragement. For these students are likely to take much longer to start to engage with feedback and also more likely to give up engaging with feedback at an earlier stage. In short these students are much more likely to become disillusioned and disenfranchised.

- Lecturers should give feedback in a language which explains which part(s) of the assignment is ‘on the right track’

The phrase students often used to describe what they wanted from feedback was being on the ‘right track’ or the ‘right lines’. Students were not expecting their work to be perfect but they wanted to know what they were doing ‘correctly’, so that they could build on those areas. Knowing what parts of their work were ‘okay’ enabled students to feel that that they did not have to make huge leaps at this early stage to be capable of studying at university.

- Assignments should be returned quickly so that students are not left worrying unnecessarily.

The stress that students were under whilst waiting for their feedback should not be underestimated. The students who were often uncertain about their ‘belonging’ at university remained particularly vulnerable to leaving university because of the liminal space they occupied until they had received praise and encouragement. The time in which students’ were waiting for feedback prevented them from allowing themselves to be fully integrated into the university experience. Therefore a quick-turn around time for first assignment feedback should be prioritised to support students settling into university.

Preventing engagement with feedback

Although, it was apparent that feedback often prevented engagement with feedback for the participants in my study and a number of authors have noted the variability of tutors' comments in terms of quantity and quality (Higgins *et al*., 2002; Ivanic *et al.*, 2000). Certainly for the students in my study if they did not receive positive feedback (praise and encouragement) early on this prevented their engagement with feedback. At the later stages of engaging with feedback in a future-orientated manner, some students became extrinsically motivated and strategic in their behaviour when they received feedback that they considered to be of poor quality. For example, they talked about choosing essay titles based on what interested the lecturer and choosing modules where they were likely to receive better feedback and/or grades, rather than basing choices on their own personal interests in their subject of study. As students became more discerning about the quality of feedback they received, they also became more dissatisfied with and frustrated by poor quality feedback. Feeling powerless to tackle this individually, some resorted to engaging with poor feedback at a superficial level, and just 'played the game'. If students are exposed to poor quality feedback over a period of time they may adapt their behaviour accordingly, such as making little attempt to engage with the feedback (Sadler, 2005).

What I have drawn from addressing my research questions is that students have little control over their feedback, and their responses to moving through the phases of engagement is not only influenced by their own personal needs and ambitions, but is in the hands of the lecturers (Would they receive positive feedback? Would they find lecturers willing to discuss their assignment feedback? Would engaging with the feedback enable them to achieve higher grades?). For me then, my interpretation of the students' feedback experiences is not only as phases of a hierarchy of needs, it is also one of a power imbalance in which students were subordinate to the 'expert' lecturers and seemed to have very little control over their own learning. In fact the students seemed to be dependent on the lecturer feedback at each phase they moved through. Some students did take responsibility for getting more feedback through a dialogue with a tutor, but gaining a dialogue was difficult due to lecturers being busy and some students not being confident to approach staff. The choices students made appeared to be about resistance (such as, not engaging with feedback or avoiding certain lecturers/modules) or compliance (responding to feedback based on what they believed lecturers wanted to improve their grades). Subsequently, the main issues which I believe have emerged from addressing my research questions are:

- The extent of lecturer/student power and control over their feedback comments
- The role of dialogue in student engagement with feedback
- How to develop suitable feedback strategies for the improvement and future-orientated phase of students' feedback needs

3a What are the implications of this for students and teachers, policy and practice across the university sector?

This section is about how I would like to inform practice based on my findings, particularly with reference to my final research sub-question 3a. 'What are the implications of this for students and teachers, policy and practice across the university sector?' and replaces the earlier notion of a 'recommendations chapter'. This section is not designed to be read as an instruction manual for better feedback practices, but rather as a guide, enabling the practitioner reader to reflect on their own practice and the ideas discussed may be strategies teachers are already familiar with. I believe these ideas for informing practice are particularly relevant to any practitioner who is concerned about the role of the student voice in assessment and feedback practices. I am recommending practices that will allow for a greater utilisation of learning communities within a more democratic system. Through the development of more co-operative and fair feedback practices students should be able to find their voice within these (Ruddock & Fielding, 2006). This section focuses on the teacher as I believe they can play a pivotal role in influencing the feedback experiences of students' through changes they make to their practice. Evidence from practice (for example increased student satisfaction in the National Student Survey) is subsequently much more likely to be able to influence university policy. Drawing on the issues that emerged from addressing the research questions:

- The extent of lecturer/student power and control over their feedback comments
- The role of dialogue in student engagement with feedback
- How to develop suitable feedback strategies for the improvement and future-orientated phase of students' feedback needs

I will focus on two feedback strategies: feedback dialogues and peer feedback as potential ways for practitioners to approach these issues. Feedback dialogues could address the issues of: the extent of lecturer/student power and control over their feedback comments and the role of dialogue in student engagement with feedback. Peer feedback could support the development of feedback strategies for the improvement and future-orientated phase of students' feedback needs

Feedback-dialogues

The students in my study all valued opportunities for dialogue with lecturers, although they did not all utilise this strategy. A range of feedback researchers have also argued for engaging students in a dialogue (Sadler, 1989; Hounsell & Hounsell 2007; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Different types of dialogue and the levels of autonomy speakers have within these have been explored by both philosophers (Habermas, 1984) and education researchers focusing on the student voice (Freire, 1996). For the philosopher Habermas (1984) an 'ideal speech act is the most open and participatory dialogue conceivable. All participants are entitled to challenge the claims of legitimacy of utterance, regardless of the power or status of the participant.' However, for this to happen, there is an assumption that all members of the community are competent speakers, made equally able by the nature of language to engage in dialogue. For example a dialogue between a child and an adult may not be regarded as an 'ideal speech-act' because the adult may be in a position of power and not allow the child equality within the discussion. The extent to which a dialogue is able to meet the 'ideal speech act' benchmark depends on the purpose and role played by those participating.

The type of dialogue most prominent for the students in my study was a transmission process of lecturers telling students about their feedback. This emphasised a power imbalance with the lecturer as 'expert' and gives the student very little control over their own learning I would like to see feedback-dialogue reconceptualised into a 'deeper' dialogue as this could be a collaborative process where students have greater ownership and responsibility for their learning. For this to happen, the language of engagement with feedback needs to be reconsidered. The concept of 'feedback-negotiation' challenges the status quo as it indicates a two-way exchange; a discussion. When we use the term negotiate, this moves the power balance placing the student and lecturer on a more equal footing. While the term 'engaging' continues to be used, this will always indicate that the student is responding to the feedback

of a lecturer. Having considered the term feedback-negotiation to address the power issue between lecturer and student I highlight some practical strategies for developing this practice.

A strategy for developing a feedback-negotiation which is generated by dialogue is advocated by Burke & Pieterick (2010, p. 41). They suggest that tutors can show students how to interpret and use marginal comments as a dialogue about their knowledge, skills and learning, and encourage students to 'talk-back' by commenting on the comments. One way in particular, of emphasising the dialogic nature of marginal feedback comments is to have students submit their written assignment as a two-column text as suggested by Brannon & Knoblauch (1982). The left side of the paper contains the body of the text, for example the essay. The right side of the text includes a running commentary by the writer about what effect and purpose is intended by the writing and the reader (who is giving feedback) can also make comments on the right side of the paper. The reader's feedback comments can be guided by what the writer intended to do and the extent to which the reader feels they achieved this. This approach to a feedback-dialogue is much more collaborative and equal because it is based on what the student is trying to do with their assignment, rather than what the tutor believes they should have done. Therefore the feedback given supports the student in what they are trying to achieve, rather than as a transmission of feedback given by an 'expert' on what the student *should* have done.

Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) argue that writers (in this instance students) know what they intend to communicate, but it is the reader (in this case lecturers) of the text who knows what has *actually been written.* Writers and readers need to exchange information about intention and effect, to negotiate bringing the actual intention and desired effect as close together as possible. Helpfully, Brannon and Knoblauch (1982) suggest questions which will facilitate a 'feedback-dialogue':

- What did the writer intend to do? (to be answered by the writer)
- What has the writing actually said? (to be answered by the reader)
- How has the writing done what it was supposed to do? (to be answered by the reader and the writer)

This approach to a negotiated feedback dialogue seems like an ideal way to allow for the student voice to be heard in feedback situations.

What are the implications of feedback-negotiations for staff, students, policy and practice?
This process of negotiation, for example as indicated by the two-column text would mean a reduction of power for staff. Lecturers would no longer be the authoritative 'expert' giving feedback to which students are expected to respond. Instead, they would be working in collaboration with students. For students, a greater ownership of their writing would be necessary for this more collegial process of writing to be effective. This would require a shift in both lecturers' and students' expectations. In many ways as lecturers already provide feedback, this would not affect policy and practice. However, ensuring a consistent approach to this type of feedback –negotiation may need policies to support this and both lecturers and students would need to be aware of the benefits of this process if it was to be effective.

Peer feedback

The issue of developing suitable feedback for students in the phases of improvement and future-orientated feedback are now discussed. The development of peer feedback could be helpful when students are at the improvement phase (reflecting on the work of others may help them also self assess their own assignments and build up informal feedback support networks and in the later phases of wanting future-orientated feedback (employers want employees who can assess their own work and that of others).

Feedback should be a collaborative process that 'encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning' (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p.205) Peer feedback can be defined as 'a communication process through which learners enter into dialogues related to performance and standards' (Lui & Carless, 2006, p. 280). Strategies for promoting peer feedback include: engaging students with criteria and embedding peer involvement within normal course processes. The development of feedback which encourages learning communities has been advocated by Nicol (2009), recognising that social bonding is a significant aspect of learning. This ideal of supportive learning environments reflects the communities of practice advocated by Lave & Wenger (1999) and is also mirrored in the scaffolding practises suggested by Vygotsky (1978). Although Vygotsky's (1978) concept of 'Scaffolding', traditionally refers to a more experienced peer supporting the learning of a less experienced student, the principle of negotiation and discussion are still pertinent. Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' emphasises that the cognitive development of individuals is a result

of social interaction. Constructivist models actively encourage dialogue. Constructivist models of learning see knowledge and meaning as being generated from experiences and evolving through participation (Rust *et al*., 2005, p. 232). For peer feedback (or peer review Burke & Pieterick, 2010, p. 64) to work effectively the classroom learning environment must be supportive, for example 'students must feel comfortable and trust one another in order to provide honest and constructive feedback' (Burke & Pieterick, 2010, p. 64). Students should have the opportunity to work in small groups early on and frequently, they should also have the opportunity to give feedback on exemplars before giving feedback on each others work. The tutor can also participate in these peer feedback sessions, perhaps asking students to comment on their work also. These activities would help to develop much more collegial learning communities not based on hierarchy.

On a practical note the skills students develop will enable them to meet some of the transferable criteria they will need as employable graduates. I suggest universities focus on equipping students to evaluate the work of themselves and others, through peer feedback. This will provide the so –called employability or transferability skills that students want and employers anticipate. The comments from participants in my study show that if feedback can be seen as having relevance in their futures it may lead to an increase in engagement with feedback. This may be further encouraged if a clearer link is made to students about their response to feedback as a transferable skill potentially being sought after by employers. Cassidy's (2006) study used peer assessment as a potential strategy for developing employability skills. It is likely that a range of transferable skills could be drawn from the practice of peer feedback, such as analysis, independent learning and communication.

What are the implications of peer feedback for staff, students, policy and practice?
Lecturers need to help to develop supportive learning environments for peer feedback to be effective. A student needs to understand the benefits of peer feedback to their own learning and they need to be committed to developing these practices with each other. Policy guidelines may help lecturers to feel more confident to initiate the use of peer feedback and 'feedback champions' (for example, lecturers who can advise other staff regarding 'best feedback practice') may encourage the development of peer feedback.

In conclusion this chapter has sought to discuss some of the issues emerging from the findings chapter, the phases of engagement students move through, dialogue and power

imbalances between students' and lecturers'. The discussion chapter has made recommendations that should facilitate the opportunity for the student voice to be heard more clearly through practices which encourage more democratic learning communities. However, for feedback-dialogues and peer feedback to work in the context of higher education, more needs to be done early on with students. Unless a student can be supported in developing a robust learner identity, they will not have the self-belief to engage in feedback-dialogues or peer feedback. The conclusion will make suggestions for future research based upon the development of feedback practices which consider the student 'voice'.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

My concluding chapter reviews the key findings from the research and considers the contribution they make. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section revisits the literature and stresses the importance of the student perspective and understanding the concept of engaging with feedback from their perspective. The following section considers the key findings from this research and their implications for engagement with feedback research and practice. The third section highlights the contribution made to knowledge by this thesis. Finally, the last section proposes directions for further research.

Revisiting the literature

There are two general trends within the literature, firstly to use academic perspectives when considering the issue of engagement with feedback and secondly to use conceptual models to understand student engagement with feedback. For example, having reviewed the literature it is clear that little work has focused on the student perspective of engaging with feedback. The research literature to date has focused heavily on the reasons students do not engage with feedback, for example a lack of motivation (Dweck, 2000) and a lack of understanding of the feedback (Chanock, 2002; Weaver, 2006; Maclellan, 2001). In short the literature has often used a student-deficit model that is suggesting some kind of inadequacy on the part of the student. The literature has also benchmarked student engagement with feedback against conceptual models of what engaging with feedback means (Sadler, 1989; Ramaprasad, 1983). The research has not focused on empirical models of what engaging with feedback is. Therefore the review of the literature that has been presented in this thesis stresses that the student perspective on engaging with feedback has had very little attention, additionally the student perspective on engagement with feedback needs to be understood. It is suggested that a difference in understanding what it means to engage with feedback by staff and students is likely to present misunderstandings and misconceptions about this issue.

Key findings

The key findings from this research suggest that the student perspective on engagement with feedback adds a new dimension to our understanding. The findings conceptualise students' moving through three phases of engaging with feedback: confirmation of learner identity,

improvement and future-orientated feedback. The findings show how the students' identities as learners, the affective impact of feedback and their experiences of feedback influence how they move through these three phases. The findings challenge research which suggests that students do not engage with feedback. However, the lack of confidence in their academic potential has also led to many students reconceptualising feedback as an indicator of their worthiness to study at university. Consequently engaging with feedback may not initially be a student's first priority. Rather students use this feedback as a sign to indicate whether their decision to attend university was 'right'. This has implications for the feedback given particularly to students, especially on their first assignments. The findings show that students place a high value on feedback and do wish to engage with feedback, but feedback may need to be redesigned to give students the information they require at the different phases of transition students are experiencing to promote effective engagement with feedback.

Contribution to knowledge

My research has contributed to knowledge in three ways. Firstly my research has emphasised an underrepresented perspective within the literature, by focusing on the student voice. Secondly, my research has used a methodology which is unusual within feedback research. The feminist inspired methodology has been used to focus on the issues of voice and power of the participants and is underpinned by a commitment to feminist principles of interviewing. This methodology has allowed the issue of engagement with feedback to be approached from a new angle with different theoretical underpinnings. Thirdly based on the research findings I have explored the affective dimension of feedback in depth leading to the development of an empirical model of the student perspective on engaging with feedback. This model re-evaluates engaging with feedback as being a series of phases:

a. Confirmation of learner identity (positive feedback which gives student 'permission' to enter student-hood, feedback which tells the student they are on the 'right-track').
b. Improvement and development (The confidence students derived from the positive feedback in phase a, now gives students the belief that they can improve and they start to use the feedback to develop their assignments further)
c. Future-orientated feedback (Now students are keen to improve their grades based on a consideration of future employment prospects. Students are much more aware of what constitutes 'good' feedback – personalised feedback that enables them to get higher grades).

The phases indicate the need for different types of feedback at each stage of the transition if students are to engage effectively with feedback.

Directions for further research

As a researcher I have learnt through doing this research that it can be difficult to truly represent the voice of participants due to the researcher often retaining control over research design, analysis and writing up. However I am keen to develop a methodology which allows for greater control by the students participating in the research process. I feel that this would be an ideal opportunity to explore the student perspective further to gain a better understanding of what is required to improve and develop student learning through engagement with formative feedback. In order to do this, I would like to test the authenticity of model 3 Student perspective on engaging with feedback and also meet more closely my aim of conveying the student voice. Rather than just showing model 3 to students for their validation, I would use a series of interview questions focusing on their feedback needs at different stages within their first year at university, for example:

1. What were you expecting/hoping the feedback comments on your first university assignment would tell you/say?
2. Did your expectations of your feedback comments change at all? In what way? When?
3. As you came to the end of your first year/ start of your second year, what did you view as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ feedback? Is this different/ same from when you first started university? Why?

I would ask these questions in a focus group as this would enable students to add to or comment on the views of others. Following this I would like students to design their own model based on their feedback needs at different stages, and the meanings and purposes that they would attach to this. Subsequently, I would present this revised model (with the students) to interested lecturers, as I believe the student voice in presenting this information would be a powerful way in which to communicate their voice effectively.

Ideally, several lecturers may try to adopt these principles and practices within the first year. My team of student researchers and myself would follow up these feedback policy amendments with students who had experienced them. At this stage of the research we would

be keen to see what impact (if any) this modified style of feedback had on students and the extent to which our model may need further adjustments. In particular we would focus on the impact these changes had on students' learner identities, the speed at which they started to engage with feedback and if the development of feedback-dialogues and collaborative learning supported students at the improvement phase and if it shifted their attitudes towards feedback in the later stages of needing future orientated feedback. Based on this reconnaissance data, adjustments may be made, but the cyclical principles of action research would be closely followed. The initiative could be tracked, for example how do they view their university experience of feedback in comparison to other students?

Concluding comments

Throughout this thesis I have tried to maintain my commitment to the student voice and their perspective on engaging with feedback. Therefore, I feel that it is only appropriate to end my thesis with this in mind. This quote I believe succinctly summarises a positive experience of a student's experience of feedback:

So I was happy because I got constructive criticism and also I got a bit of encouragement as well like you're on the right lines just like a little bit more detail in this and maybe leave this out. (Scott, interview)

This quote embodies the significance of constructive feedback, which fosters motivation, enables students' to understand their goals and know what steps they need to take to make further improvements. These are all principles of assessment for learning (Gardner, 2006, p. 3) perhaps indicating that higher education may learn a lot from the formative assessment practices within the compulsory education setting.

Chapter 10: Postscript

Feedback is an unusual topic to research as a PhD student receiving feedback on drafts of my thesis chapters. Therefore this postscript is a reflection on my own experience of feedback throughout the process of writing up my thesis. I can categorise my experience into two distinct themes: The impact feedback on my self-esteem and my inability to close the 'feedback-loop'. The irony of discussing findings which indicated that feedback damaged student self-esteem and that students found it difficult to close the gap between their current and desired performance was not lost on me. As my supervision team and I discussed feedback on draft chapters I sometimes wondered if we were really talking about the experiences of my research participants or my own inability to use the feedback effectively.

Self-esteem

Opening up a draft chapter to see it covered in track changes was both overwhelming and devastating to the extent I now have a strong antipathy towards the comments tool on Microsoft Word. Although previously I had believed I held an incremental theory of learning (Dweck, 2000) and had overcome other unhappy and miserable challenges, such as passing my driving test my self-esteem has took a huge battering from the feedback I received. I realised too late that actually my supervisors must have believed that I had the potential and ability to cope and complete the write-up of my thesis to have taken the time to give such detailed and astute feedback. Sadly it was only in the very last months of my PhD that I realised how much the feedback had challenged me and improved the quality of my thesis. It seems that more must be done (for myself and others) to address the emotional impact of feedback, as it has such a huge potential to facilitate improvement.

Closing the feedback loop

The verbal dialogue I had with my supervisors was a turning point in my PhD after struggling for months to amend my work based on written feedback I did not fully understand. I found that I made most progress with a verbal dialogue – what did I mean? what was I trying to say? why did I think this section'/idea was important? I don't think there is a magic formula, other than to say verbal feedback enabled me to engage much more effectively because I had a better idea of what was expected and I could also explain what I had wanted to do. The addition of verbal feedback made the feedback process much more holistic, not an add-on at

the end of learning. Instead of just trying to make amendments based on written feedback, the feedback process became a key component within my process of learning.

Confidence

In the last two months of my thesis writing I had a very different style of feedback from a 'critical reader'. The verbal feedback from my critical reader focused much more on instilling confidence and self-belief in myself and my research findings. Through this motivating type of feedback I was able to work in a much more productive and effective way, simply because I had been told that I could, perhaps suggesting that my critical reader could be viewed as my 'significant other'. In many ways I think this was the 'positive feedback' I had needed, and helped me greatly in coping with my own liminal experience of oscillating between feeling I had a thesis and I didn't have a thesis.

My critical reader also provided written feedback in a different way, rather than using track changes, she simply provided the comments on a word document with page references. This was much less intimidating and I felt much more in control of making amendments. The maxim 'less is more' seemed appropriate here. Instead of commenting on everything that was 'wrong' she focused on pertinent issues and instilled in me that this feedback was a starting point. This gave me a feeling of much more ownership over my writing and the changes I was making. Instead of feeling stuck I felt inspired and liberated to shape my chapters in the way I wanted. In many ways I felt that I should not have needed this type of feedback after all I was not an undergraduate with a fragile learner identity. Nevertheless the value of positive and motivating feedback should not be underestimated regardless of who we are. My critical reader perhaps unwittingly acknowledged the affective impact of feedback and subsequently had developed feedback strategies which provided positive and enabling feedback.

Feedback as an 'art-form'

A piece of feedback from a colleague made me start to consider the skill in giving feedback, in fact I think giving good feedback should be considered as an art form. It could be argued that to give very positive feedback, whilst highlighting areas for development is in perhaps many ways standard good practice, and this feedback gave practical ways for improvement and linked these to flaws. Yet the art form for me was how that piece of feedback made me feel. I did not feel disheartened by the feedback. Instead I felt empowered and pleased by the

feedback – quite an unusual feeling in my experience! It gave me the confidence to move forward. I think an analysis of the feedback itself may in part explain this, for example the use of hedges within the feedback 'my own view is', 'If it was me…' This withdrawal of 'feedback-giver' as 'authority' certainly made the feedback less threatening and lends itself well to the feedback-negotiation concept I explored in my discussion chapter. In many ways this piece of feedback had been a negotiation as there was an element of self-assessment, reflection and discussion before the feedback was written up. It seems to me that in many ways greater links must start to be paid between the affective dimensions of feedback and feedback delivery. For me it seems maybe it is not enough to model our practice on adages such as 'feedback-sandwiches', instead the processes and skill in giving feedback need to be explored in much greater depth. A more democratised feedback model needs to be created if we are to engender humanising educational aspirations, rather than the dehumanising ones that all too often seem to be apparent within the practice of giving feedback, as described so aptly by interview participants in chapter 6. As with all pedagogic research the art of giving feedback needs to be given greater status if we are to start to support *all* learners effectively. In summary I think carrying out this research has also made me more conscious of the complexities of giving effective feedback which can be used for improvement, whilst also considering how any negative emotional impact can be minimised.

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Appendix 1 Semi-structured interviews – questioning schedule

Participant's background

1. Could you just tell me a little bit about yourself?

Prompts:

- Why did you decide to study *subject at university?
- What made you come to study at Newcity university?
- Educational background e.g. school
- Commitments outside of university
- Family background

Feedback experiences – prior to university

2. I'm thinking about *just* before you came to university - what educational experiences had you had?

Prompts:

- Qualification
- How long ago?
- Subject?
- Positive or negative studying experience?

3. What was your experience of feedback on *qualification at *educational institution?

Prompts:

- Quantity
- Quality
- Perception of feedback

4. Can you explain a bit more about what you did with the feedback?

Prompts:

- Can you give me an example?
- Did you always do this? Why?

Feedback experiences – at university (DAW1300/PRW1760)

5. Thinking about DAW1300/ PRW1760 what prompted you to hand in your assignment/report?
6. Could you tell me about the feedback you received on your assignment/report?

   Prompts:

   - Types of comment
   - Examples of what the comments said (refer to feedback on assignment if at hand)

7. You've just talked about the feedback that you've had on this assignment/ report –

what (if anything) have you done with the feedback (Can you give an example)?

Prompts:

- Practical changes?
- Reading?
- Why?
- Comparison to other modules being studied

8. Did you feel the need to see the lecturer/tutor/demonstrator about your written feedback? Why?

'Engaging with feedback'

9. I'm interested in the idea of 'engaging with feedback' – what does that mean to you?
10. Using your own definition – to what extent do you feel that you have 'engaged with the feedback'? Why? Can you give an example?

Feedback experiences – overall significance of university experience

11. Feedback for you at university, how important (or not!) do you think that's going to be for you in terms of your own personal aims?
12. Is there anything else you want to say/think is important about feedback which you haven't had chance to say?

Appendix 2: Feedback questionnaire

Experience of feedback questionnaire

How often do you collect your assignments? (choose 1 response)

- [ ] Always
- [ ] Nearly always
- [ ] About half the time
- [ ] Rarely
- [ ] Never
- [ ] Don't know

Why do you collect your assignments? (choose all that apply)

- [ ] It helps me improve
- [ ] My lecturer expects me to
- [ ] It tells me my grade
- [ ] It explains my grade in more detail
- [ ] The written comments motivate me to keep learning
- [ ] Other _____

Why wouldn't you collect your assignments? (choose all that apply)

- [ ] Can access grades online
- [ ] Lecturer is never in room when I go
- [ ] Don't understand written comments
- [ ] Written comments are unhelpful
- [ ] Don't really need to improve any further
- [ ] Other _____

How often does written feedback improve your confidence and motivation? (choose only 1 response)

- [ ] Always

- [ ] Nearly always
- [ ] About half the time
- [ ] Rarely
- [ ] Never
- [ ] Other_____

How often do the written comments help you improve your next essay grade? (choose only 1 response)

- [ ] Always
- [ ] Nearly always
- [ ] About half the time
- [ ] Rarely
- [ ] Never
- [ ] Other_____

Under what circumstances would you collect your assignments more than you do now? (choose all that apply)

- [ ] I already collect all of my assignments
- [ ] Nothing could convince me to collect my assignments
- [ ] If I didn't pass
- [ ] If my grade was different from normal
- [ ] If the lecturer was in room or feedback was more accessible (on-line)
- [ ] If I could understand the written comments
- [ ] If the written comments was more helpful
- [ ] If the written comments were more positive
- [ ] Other _____

Under what circumstances would you use written comments more than you do now? (choose all that apply)

- ☐ I already use all of my feedback
- ☐ Nothing could convince me to even read the written comments
- ☐ If I didn't pass
- ☐ If my grade was different from normal
- ☐ If it was offered before the assignment was due
- ☐ If I could understand the written comments
- ☐ If the feedback was more helpful
- ☐ If the feedback was more encouraging about my potential to improve
- ☐ Other _____

What type of feedback do you find useful?

What type of feedback do you find unhelpful?

Do you have any additional comments about your experience of feedback?

A bit about you:

Gender:

Male		Female	

Age:

18-21		22-25		26-30		31-40		41+	

How would you describe your ethnic origin?

white British	
white Irish	
white European	
white Other	
Mixed white &Black Caribbean	
Mixed white & Black African	
Mixed white & Asian	
Mixed other	

Asian or Asian British Indian	
Asian or Asian British Pakistani	
Asian or Asian British Other	
Black or Black British Caribbean	
Black or Black British African	
Black or Black British Other	
Chinese	
Other ethnic group (please state)	

What do your parents do for a living (or if you are a mature student state your occupation prior to entering university).

Professional	
Managerial & Technical	
Skilled non-manual	
Skilled manual	
Partly skilled	
Unskilled	
Self-employed	
Not in employment/ unemployed	

Has anyone else in your immediate family been to university?

Parent	
Sibling	

Appendix 3: Analysis framework for reflective writing

Themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998):

- Conditions
- Interactions among actors
- Strategies and tactics
- Consequences

Conditions: Feedback which supports improvement

Also it helps to get feedback because it is only then that you realise, oh I can't believe I forgot to put that in. You know the stuff you sometimes just go blank when it comes to essay writing and suddenly forget. I also find that it feels better to receive comments not only on the improvements but on the good points too. Without knowing the good points you would not feel any sense of achievement from what you have already done. (Gemma, reflective writing)

Feedback should aim to help improve my work, whether it's an essay draft or any other piece of writing. Feedback should be constructive to improve the work. That is not to say it has to be positive. Feedback should tell me where, and perhaps how, I need to improve or change the work. (Zahara, reflective writing)

Interactions among actors: Tutor - student verbal feedback

I think its best that the tutor sits with the student face to face and explains what has gone worng [sic] or what points have been covered and are strong and weak.(Marcus, reflective writing)

Some have given me a detailed analysis or one on one sessions. I have found that the latter has been the most useful, as you understand more the processes you must go through to improve, and it feels as though a more personal approach has been taken. (Clarissa, reflective writing)

Strategies and tactics: Personalized support/responses

So retrieving feedback is necessary, for what we presume we are writing may not be worth including, for that reason we need another person's insight on our work as learning a different style is appropriate for writing. (Shona, reflective writing)

My main thought feedback is that it helps me see what level I am working at and how to progress. I see that the feedback I get is a milestone set for me to reach so that I can reach the level of my full potential. By getting feedback helps me see what I have written from another person's view. (Harmina, reflective writing)

Consequences: Damage to self-esteem

'Bad' feedback can be one of the worst roadblocks a student can face. If feedback isn't constructive, and simply points out the flaws in an essay or piece of writing, I know from personal experience that not only is it very soul destroying but it also makes a student doubt their ability to write, thus resulting in a worse essay. When feedback is difficult to understand it is pointless and redundant, both for the student and the teacher, not being able to understand feedback can be very frustrating. (Adida, reflective writing)

Personal, positive feedback impacts upon our mental attitude. If we continually receive grades lower than we anticipate, with little explanation, or worse- with negative feedback and clumsy criticism- then we may become struck by the belief that we're wasting our time, the "Why bother?" mentality becoming draining and pervasive. (Nicolette, reflective writing)

Examples of reflective writing documents:

1. My main thought feedback is that it helps me see what level I am working at and how to progress. I see that the feedback I get is a milestone set for me to reach so that I can reach the level of my full potential. By getting feedback helps me see what I have written from another person's view and seeing the mistakes or points I made I failed of seen. By not getting any feedback would

make it difficult to understand weather [sic] what I have written is right or wrong. Any feedback should be seen as good feedback as the marker/teacher is helping you to go on further so that there could be more information put into your writing to ensure that you can move ahead and learn something from what you have written. (Harmina, reflective writing)

2. Feedback should aim to help improve my work, whether it's an essay draft or any other piece of writing. Feedback should be constructive to improve the work. That is not to say it has to be positive. Feedback should tell me where, and perhaps how, I need to improve or change the work. Feedback should make me think about what I've written, and examine how and why I have written it, in order to improve it. This would help to build my confidence as a writer, and to think more about what and how I write, and how I support my arguments if I am writing an essay. Ultimately, it is my responsibility to choose how I use the feedback. It might not work with what I had in mind. I can choose to ignore or to use the feedback. Feedback should enable self-examination to help me understand why I make the choices that I make. I need to decide how to use the feedback. A lack of feedback does not help me to improve my work, or to help build my confidence. Constructive feedback should help me to produce the best work that I possibly can. (Zahara, reflective writing)

3. Watched the video and thought that it was quite helpful. It has given an understanding of lots of different people's feelings towards essay drafts and feedback. From watching the whole video I have realised that you can have fresh ideas all of the time and first ideas aren't always final ideas. I feel that from previous experiences that without feedback you would never know if you were getting anywhere. Also that by doing a draft you get clear ideas on what you are going to put into your essay, this I feel is much better than not bothering to do a draft and going straight on to the final draft. Also it helps to get feedback because it is only then that you realise, oh I can't believe I forgot to put that in. You know the stuff you sometimes just go blank when it comes to essay writing and suddenly forget. I also find that it feels better to receive comments not only on the improvements but on the good points too. Without knowing the good points you would not feel any sense of achievement from what you have already done. (Ian, reflective writing)

Appendix 4: Analysis framework for interview transcripts

Analysis framework for interview transcripts:			
Stage	**Analysis**	**Focus**	**Theory**
1	Themes	What is being said?	Grounded theory
2	Conceptual names	Meanings, context?	Grounded theory
3	Memos	My thoughts and questions	Grounded theory
4	Metaphors, Contrastive rhetoric, extremist talk	How is it being said?	Narrative inquiry

Stage 1 – Themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998):

- Conditions
- Interactions among actors
- Strategies and tactics
- Consequences

Conditions – Limited and ambiguous feedback (see page 117 Findings chapter 7)
It's the same with the other one – "however try and keep this a little bit more focused." "Good start on a critical analysis" - how could I go a bit more further in that? I mean you can probably see from that you can't get much from feedback like this. (Arvind, interview)

Interactions among actors – Unapproachable staff (see page 117 Findings chapter 7)
**Subject is a problem, your just given your assignment and then don't get any help. It's like they are too important and won't touch us. They think they are better than us.* (Debbie, interview)

Strategies and tactics – Personalized support (see page 117 Findings chapter 7)
Yeah like the last one there was like I really just didn't understand the feedback and I went and had a word with the demonstrators and I didn't find that useful either hence that is why I said to yourself I was just going to pay the money and have private tuition, which as I have said worked. It was a bit of a shock because my grades just went from E to B. (Arvind, interview)

Consequences – Damage to self-esteem (see page 117 Findings chapter 7)
Yeah definitely when I first had mine I was you know I was like am I on the right track, do I want to do this? Am I going to get anywhere? So you know from that point its left me with I will not approach that demonstrator I just will not go anywhere near her I go to talk to the other person. (Arvind, interview)

Stage 2: Conceptual names (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)
*Nobody likes being told that they're **wrong** but I think you've got to do it you* know (Helen, interview)

*If it says this is absolute **rubbish** again it is **not very constructive** because in my mind you think you have done what is necessary but it hasn't worked.* (Henry, interview)

Stage 3: Memos (Strauss & Corbin, 1998)
Again is this about valuing feedback to improve? A link to hard work and motivation, accepting responsibility for own learning?

This suggests students believe that feedback can help them improve, close the gap. Does this contradict literature that says students can't use feedback, misunderstand feedback etc. Or is this about the perception of the value of feedback?

Stage 4: Narrative inquiry techniques (Cousin, 2009)

- Metaphors
- Contrastive rhetoric
- Extremist talk

Metaphors
Students only seek help when they hit the buffers. (Henry, interview)

Contrastive rhetoric
Oh I did terrible. I just like messed around you know **'past and present'**
I wasn't really interested, but as I got older you know you

want to do well you are more motivated because you know the outcome in the end. Yeah I was like in the bottom class when I was a little kid about 5, then I worked myself up and then in my last year at school I was in the top set which was a good achievement for me. I thought I'd come to uni to be good at Psychology. (Helen, interview)

Extremist talk

So they can't go to them and say I'm hacked off **'Lecturer shouts at students'** *or I don't understand what you are on about because he thinks he's going to bawl his head off because you know some teachers and tutors like to bawl.* (Henry, interview)

Appendix 5: Interview transcript

I: So first of all Helen could you just tell me a little bit about yourself?

H: Yeah well erm I'm 19 and I'm really interested in Psychology and that's why I picked it. No like I just tend to enjoy life I do a lot of walking, play a lot of sport, do swimming that sort of thing.

I: I'm a big swimmer actually.

H: A part from that I just do work. That sort of thing.

I: Cool excellent. So what can you remember about your really early days at school?

H: Oh I did terrible. I just like messed around you know I wasn't really interested, but as I got older you know you want to do well, you are more motivated because you know the outcome in the end. Yeah I was like in the bottom class when I was a little kid about 5, then I worked myself up and then in my last year at school I was in the top set which was a good achievement for me. I thought I'd come to uni to be good at Psychology.

I: Yeah that's excellent. That's good. So you said you were interested in Psychology, was there any other reasons why you decided to study Psychology or was that like the main reason?

H: Yeah well I've always wanted to make peoples lives a lot easier and by studying Psychology I feel like it you know try and make them easier to cope with things and I'm looking at health Psychology because it is to do with the diet and different things like that also how people cope with illnesses, how they cope with that psychologically how they deal with that, say if they've got cancer how do they deal with the news about them and their family around them. It's gonna be tough but it's something I want to do and since I've come to uni I've been quite happy with the grades that I've got and I think it is because I'm willing to put the work in.

I: Yeah. That's fine. So what made you come to Newcity University?

H: Well I was going to go to Winchester I was so close I think it got to like I got the grades and you know I thought I can't go because it is so far away and I live in Newcity anyway.

I: Where is Winchester? My geography is really terrible.

H: It's down south

I: Oh Right it's down south.

H: It's about 5 hours away.

I: Oh God it's a long way, yeah, yeah.

H: And it's like getting closer and I was thinking I can't leave so I'm in a relationship as well and I feel like I can't leave.

I: Yeah it's hard isn't it.

H: I can't leave and I'm a bit of a wimp, but I like to be independent but have the support of your family as well.

I: Yeah. That's cool. So obviously you are like from Newcity so are you like living at home?

H: No I moved into halls because as I said I wanted independence, but you know I still want to see my family when I can and that, but yeah I'm in halls. I only live like well if I lived at home I'd be like 10 minutes away from here, but like now I'm like 2 minutes.

I: That's cool. That's really handy.

H: Yeah

I: So have you got like I think you mentioned a job, like a lot of other commitment outside of uni like a job and family or is it not too bad?

H: I have got a job, but it's about 16 hours, but like I can do more, but like today if I said I couldn't work they'd be fine with it because they know I'm at uni and I let them know before I came, but apart from that no I play badminton and swimming and do walking and stuff like that, but that's like when I have got the time to do that so know it's been good. I haven't found it that hard so far.

I: Excellent. That's good. So what kind of jobs or careers have your family have. Have they had any psychological links or have they been quite different?

H: Not really, my Mum's like I don't know her job title she goes round old people's homes makes sure their okay and that.

I: That's interesting.

H: My Stepdad he's like a manager of well like he's in the council he like supervises people and stuff. My Dad he's like unemployed.

I; Cool yeah. So has anyone in your family been to university or are you like the first one?

H: Yeah well only my stepbrother

I: Right

H: He finished like a few years ago, but since he came out of uni he's like hasn't had a job because he thinks he's going to be in this band.

I: Right. So what did he study?

H: Music

I: Ah obviously yeah.

H: He's in a band, they do alright, but their not famous yet.

I: It's just to get the break isn't it?

H: I think he's a bit hopeful, but he drives my Mum mad because he's always there in his room playing his guitar.

I: Yeah. So maybe if he becomes famous I can say well I interviewed the stepsister of the guy that's in that band. (laughter)

H: Yeah, but he hasn't had a job, not even like a little job since he's come out.

I: He's just in the band.

H: He does a few gigs and that, but nothing major.

I: Cool. So now I'm just thinking about just before you came to university. What educational experiences had you had?

H: Like going to sixth form and stuff?

I: Yeah

H: Yeah well obviously I just had like a normal educational life, like I went from primary school to well then I moved to Junior school and then which ended in Year 6 to left to go to year 7 for High school and then I stayed on for sixth form. Before there and then I came here.

I: Right so what did you study at sixth form?

H: Psychology, Geography, History and English. Well I did Business studies and English literature and language, but they were AS levels, but the others were A levels.

I: So basically you did your A levels in Psychology, History and Geography. Cool. Got you. Excellent. So did you like get a lot of feedback on you're A level work, or not really, or did it depend on the subject?

H: It depended on the subject. With Geography they were always giving you feedback and History really, but erm with Psychology we had a about four different teachers in one year and you did work and you never got it back

I: Right

H: So that wasn't helpful for me because I picked Psychology for here, but luckily I got my grades and the feedback would have helped a lot.

I: So what about the feedback in Geography and History? Was it like you did drafts and handed it in or what?

H: Yeah well they let us know the criteria we had to do.

I: That's good yeah

H: We did drafts we had to do quite a lot of drafts.

I: Told you what to do to get a better grade or whatever.

H: I found it a lot helpful, but overall I got all D's for my History, Geography and Psychology, but I feel If I got more feedback on the Psychology because that was my better subject.

I: And you kind of did that like without any feedback and so if you had got the feedback you'd have been able to get the grade

H: Yeah cos we did a piece of coursework for Psychology and we got like no help in doing it. We just got the sheet of what to do and I think we just had one draft, but even then they didn't go through it or anything. It's quite you know

I: Unhelpful really?

H: And the teachers didn't seem to be like they were just there to get the job done so they didn't really seem that helpful really.

I: Oh well. Never mind.

H: It's a new start here.

I: Yeah exactly that's right. Thinking about PRW1760 what prompted you to hand in your report.

H: Well I'd fail if I didn't, well to be fair I find this subject this module a lot harder than the other Psychology ones so I was really worried about the grade for this one so and I'll put as much effort as I can in because that's where I'm struggling and then when I got my grade back I did better than I thought and it's probably one of the best grades so far and I think if you put the work in then you get the grade that you want.

I: Yeah, that's good. So obviously you did get some feedback on that and I just kind of wondered what comments you got and what kinds of things it says.

H: About referencing really, the major thing was about the referencing, that the referencing wasn't accurate. Yeah and to just like evaluate more like through it throughout the research, the report.

I: Right.

H: So yeah erm and with every piece of work I have I'm quite bad at the structure.

I: Right

H: And I think that's what I've got to work on now.

I: Right.

H: And when I handed in because like they said about my structure in this one when I came to do my second report I tried to like put a better structure and you know and pick up on all the points that they've done and you know hopefully I'll get a better grade by doing that.

I: Right by looking at the structure. Good, good. Right so erm you've just talked about the feedback that you've had in this report so what kind of things have you done in this report to kind of address all those things?

H: So like how addressed them, the steps I went through?

I: Yeah

H: Well I had my feedback sheet and I was doing my work on my computer and I made sure I'd done everything so I ticked everything, so If I hadn't done it I'd make sure I looked it up and tried to address it because I think if it is given to you there then you know you should address it you should because at the end of the day you are going to suffer if you don't.

I: Yeah exactly, exactly. So the feedback you got did you find it was quite practical to use or not, you know in terms of making changes to your next report, could you do that or..

H: Yeah I found that a lot of things that I had done wrong or could do better were simple things like if I'd proof read it I'd probably have realised it.

I: Just like proof read it and stuff.

H: Yeah they said if you had any problems with the feedback and stuff go to a demonstrator, but I found everything they said was clear and you know.

I: So you didn't really feel that you needed to see the demonstrators?

H: And I know that if I did find something wrong with it then I would go to them, but this time

I: You were quite happy?

H: Yeah.

I: That's really good. So obviously you have to like attach your sheet and you know it is quite like a compulsory part of the course isn't it. So if you sort out in your mind. So how much of it was because it was compulsory and how much was because you wanted to make the changes?

H: I think it helps if, if it wasn't compulsory I think some people might think that they won't do it which is fair enough but you know I've always been if I've been criticised or something I like to sort it you know but erm cos like if I get criticisms I think like oerr, but then I look at it the next day and think like maybe they were right you know, nobody likes being told that they're wrong but I think you've got to do it you know, but I think if it wasn't compulsory you know I think a lot of people wouldn't do it but I would.

I: Because?

H: Because you know I don't know because like I haven't had the most lavish lifestyle as a kid and I think you know I want to do well so you know just for yourself kind of thing and to prove people wrong.

I: Yeah exactly. I understand. Definitely.

H: You know because I'm quite stubborn.

I: Yeah I know I'd be the same.

H: So do you think you would have done the things that you needed to if it hadn't been compulsory or not. Are you quite happy that you would have done those things?
I think definitely because last year I was quite annoyed at the people I didn't get feedback from and now I've got loads and I'm like yes.

I: You're quite lucky, quite happy?

H: Yeah I feel like you know if I came to the end of the year and got a bad grade then I think like that's my own fault. I should have listened you know.

I: That's really good. Thank you. So I was just thinking, this is one of my last questions really. Feedback for you at university, how important do you think that's going to be for you in terms of like your own personal aims?

H: Ah well I think it is quite important because I think like if you can have feedback you know how to take criticism and throughout work you are going to get it. So if you can't take it now you're never going to take it.

I: Yeah, that's a good way of looking at it really.

H: But you know I think by getting this feedback it will help me get better at things because you know at school it was my worst module like the side of it writing up a report, but with Psychology you need to be able to write up reports and stuff like that and do that properly now.

I: Exactly and its not like you can't do it it's like you need advice on how to do it. It's really good. Thank you for all your answers it's been really good, really helpful. So this is my very last thing and if you don't have anything that's fine. I just wondered if there was anything you wanted to say about feedback that's quite important that you hadn't had chance from my questions.

H: No not really. I just think if you get feedback you should do it. I don't know if it should be compulsory I don't know I just think that's an individual choice, but I'm glad I've got it.

I: Yeah I know because this is what's interesting because like the other module I'm using isn't a Psychology module, it's a study skills module in Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences and basically using the feedback isn't compulsory on that and like some students do you use it and some students don't. I'm just not sure how much, like you know some students would use it regardless whereas some students use it because it is compulsory.

H: Do you reckon your grades would get higher if you used the feedback or wouldn't?

I: I think at the moment there isn't like a clear trend I think if tutors gave feedback in such a way that students could see their grades improving I think it would be more motivating, but like the feedback you've got sometimes like getting the referencing right and the structure right will help improve the grades but like if they are just picking up on really minor things it doesn't really help you improve the grade so people will think what's the point.

H: I think if it was something minor I might forget it, but like the structure is really important and hopefully I'll get a better grade next time.

I: But if you don't and you are doing all these things then you can query it can't you and say well I'm doing all these things and my grade hasn't improved.

H: Some people might do it once and then if they haven't got a better grade then they're going to think that they're not going to do it again because they feel like they've put the effort in and there's no point

I: Yeah exactly

H: Basically there has been some research in the School of Education and there is a guy there and basically he gave the students feedback on their work and it was optional whether they did this or not but basically they could get feedback on their work and it was three things and basically if you do these three things your grade will go from this grade to this grade. So the students could see a really clear link on how to improve their work and I think sometimes it works, but sometimes they are rightly not convinced.

I: Or they think if I just do this I'll get a better grade, but they need to do other things as well.

H: Or maybe they are just so focused on these other things, they forget about other things.

I: Yeah. Oh well, that's really helpful thank you so much that's wonderful.

Appendix 6: Feedback comment analysis framework (Background study)

A range of coding frameworks have been developed for the purpose of analysing written feedback comments, in particular I drew on the work of Hyland and Hyland (2001) and Goldstein and Conrad (1990) to analyse the written feedback on DAW1300. There are a range of themes that run through these analytical frameworks, such as praise (or lack of), questioning, content, surface features such as spelling and grammar, statements and examples.

Analysis of feedback	**Definition**	**Examples of feedback comments**	**Framework**
Praise	Attributes credit to another for some characteristic, attribute or skill.	• *'Good'* • *'You've got some good ideas in places'*	Hyland & Hyland (2001)
Comments with hedges	Softens responses, provides suggestions	• *'I think'* • *'Maybe you could consider…'*	Conrad & Goldstein (1990)
Comments without hedges	Direct, uses imperatives	• *'You write your paper as though the claims you make apply to all women. Be careful because they do not'.* • *'You tend to overuse "within"'* • *'Make sure that all the details you include are relevant'.*	Conrad & Goldstein (1990)
Grammar and punctuation	Surface features of writing and presentation	• *'Not Capital letter'* • *'Be careful to check your use of inverted commas'*	Hyland & Hyland (1990)
Questions	1.Yes/No – focusing on the possibility of adding something 2.WH questions – focus on supplying information, providing analysis or explanation	• *'According to whom?'* • *'Could you give a couple of brief examples here?'*	Conrad & Goldstein (1990)

	3.Direct/indirect		
Statements, declaratives	1.Necessity of doing something 2.Possibility of doing something 3.Characterizing the nature of the text 4.Stating an opinion	• *'This is not especially clear to me'* • *'I wouldn't think any of them were of the peoples choosing!'*	Conrad & Goldstein (1990)
Content	Text specific comments	• *'I think you would be better using more Blake sources instead as that will allow you to draw comparisons between your four sources'*	Conrad & Goldstein (1990)
Examples	Highlight a revision strategy	• *'Look at the model essay in the Week 8 folder as well for a general idea on how to construct this'*	Conrad & Goldstein, (1990)